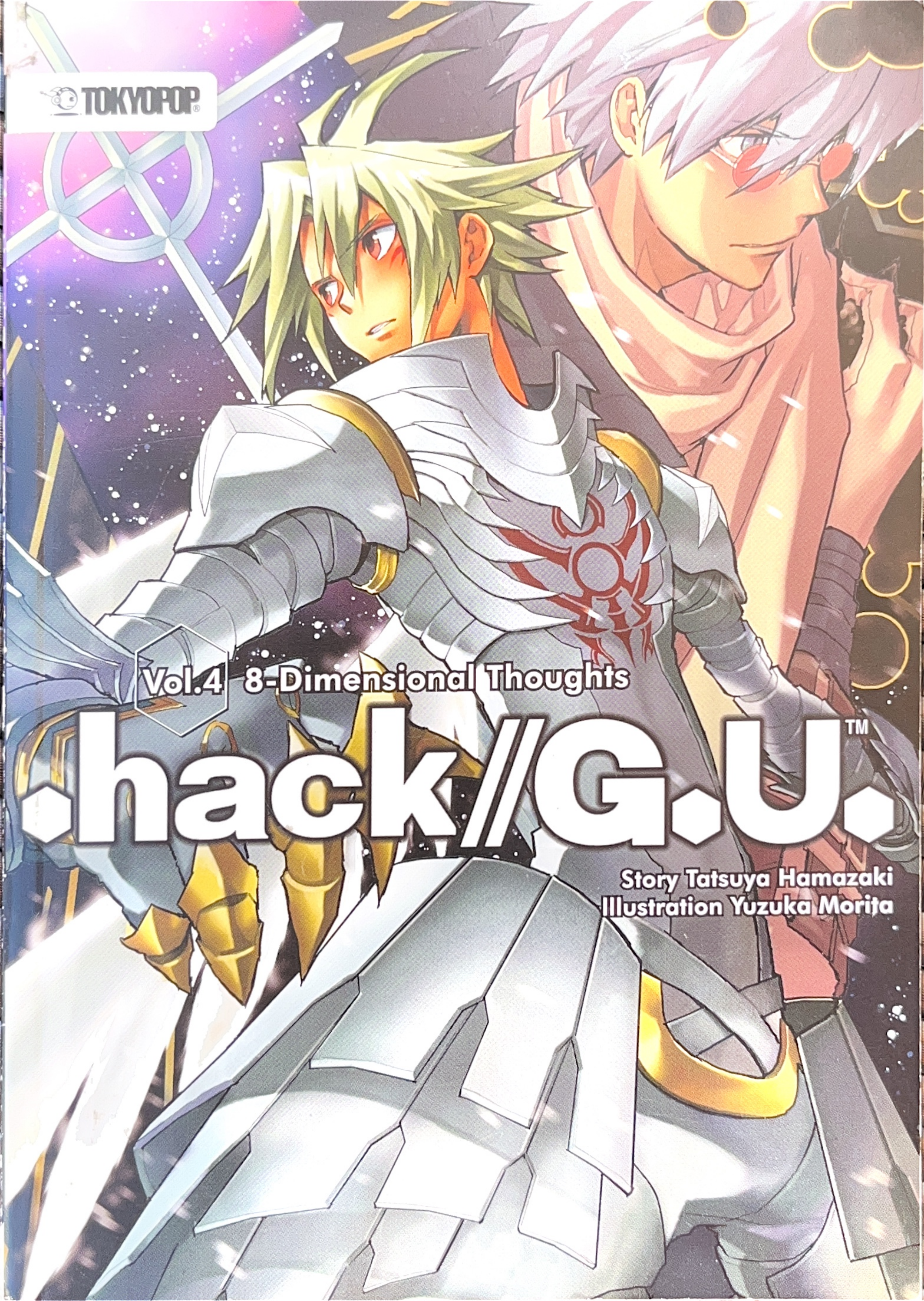


 TOKYOPOP®The background of the cover features two anime-style characters. In the foreground, a character with spiky blonde hair and red eyes is shown from the chest up, wearing intricate silver and gold armor. A red, stylized symbol is visible on their chest. Behind them, a character with spiky pink hair and red eyes is shown from the chest up, wearing an orange and red outfit. The background is a dark purple space with white star-like specks and a large, glowing blue and white geometric structure on the left.

Vol.4 8-Dimensional Thoughts

hack//G.U.™

Story Tatsuya Hamazaki
Illustration Yuzuka Morita



hack//G.U.TM

VOL_04: 8-DIMENSIONAL THOUGHTS

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A  **TOKYOPOP**® Prose Novel

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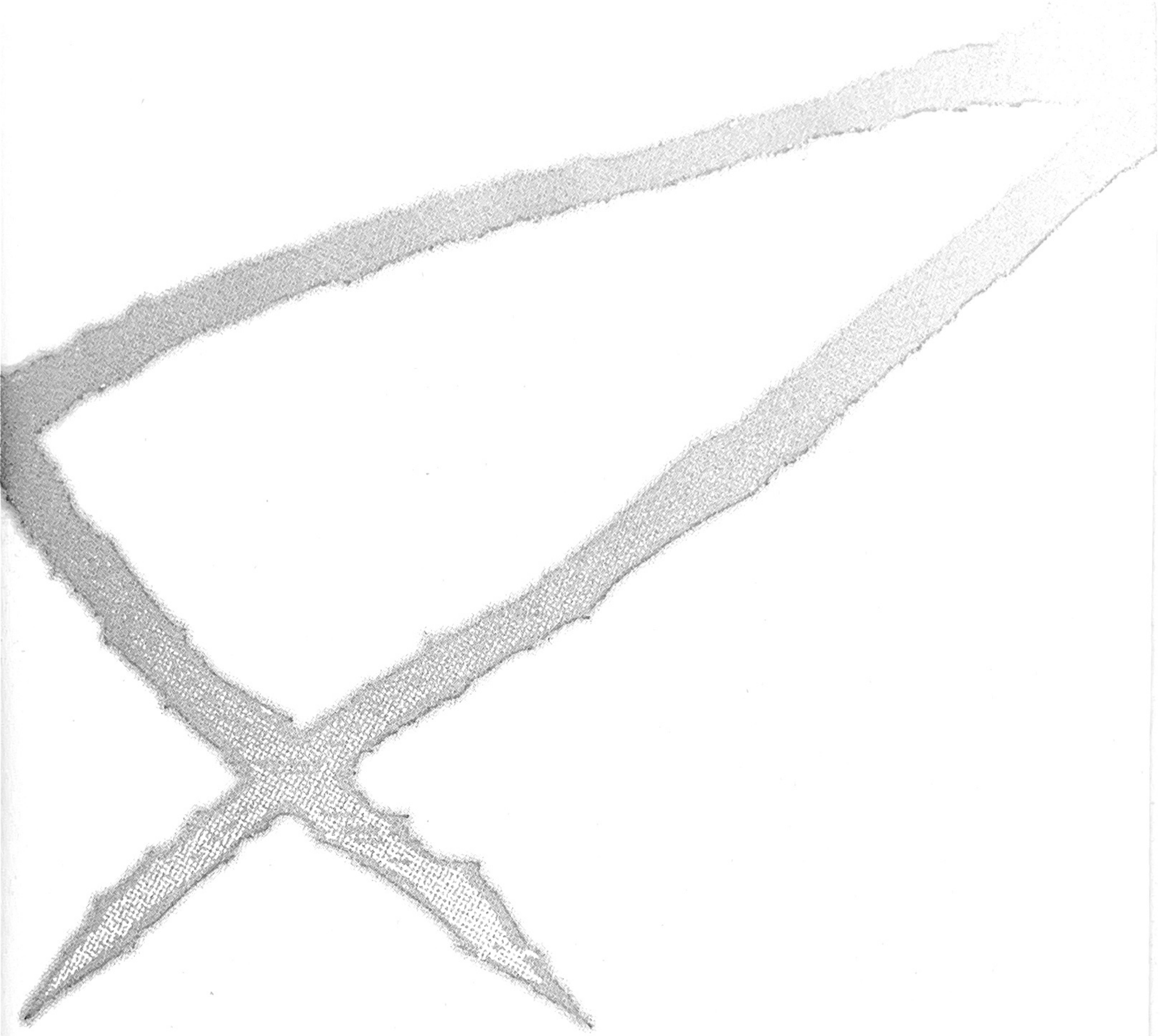
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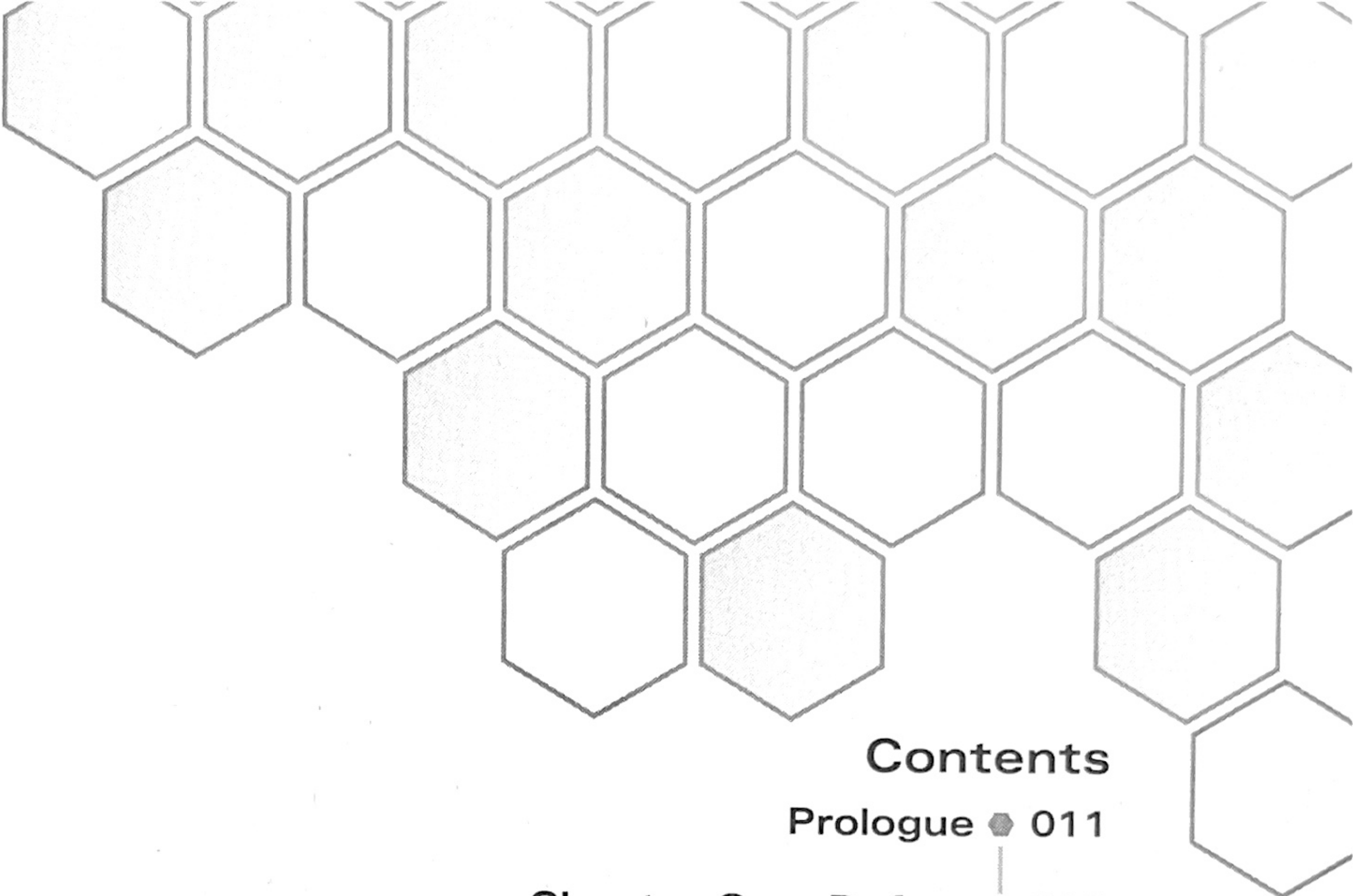
最後の旅になると確信して、
亮^{ハセヲ}は眼前に現れた道に
最初の一歩を踏み出した。

Haseo was certain that this would be his final journey as he took his first step on the path that had appeared before him.



Aina, the female
Shadow Warlock,
was like a motionless
celluloid doll. She
didn't so much
as blink.



A decorative pattern of hexagons in the top right corner of the page. Some hexagons are shaded in a light gray, while others are white. The pattern is arranged in a honeycomb-like structure.

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YATA

Leader of the G.U. team, employed by CC Corp to tackle the AIDA. Uses a system called the Serpent of Lore, which allows him to view everything in *The World*.



OVAN

Former master of the adventuring guild Twilight Brigade, to which Haseo used to belong. Haseo hasn't seen him for half a year.



AINA

A girl PC that sits on a rocking chair in a white room. She bears Tri-Edge's sign. What is her relationship with Ovan?



SHINO

Member of Twilight Brigade with whom Haseo was close. Half a year ago she was PKed by Tri-Edge and has since been in a coma.

hack//G.U. MAIN CHARACTERS



ATOLI

A Harvest Cleric of the pacifist guild, Moon Tree. Haseo saved her from being PKed.



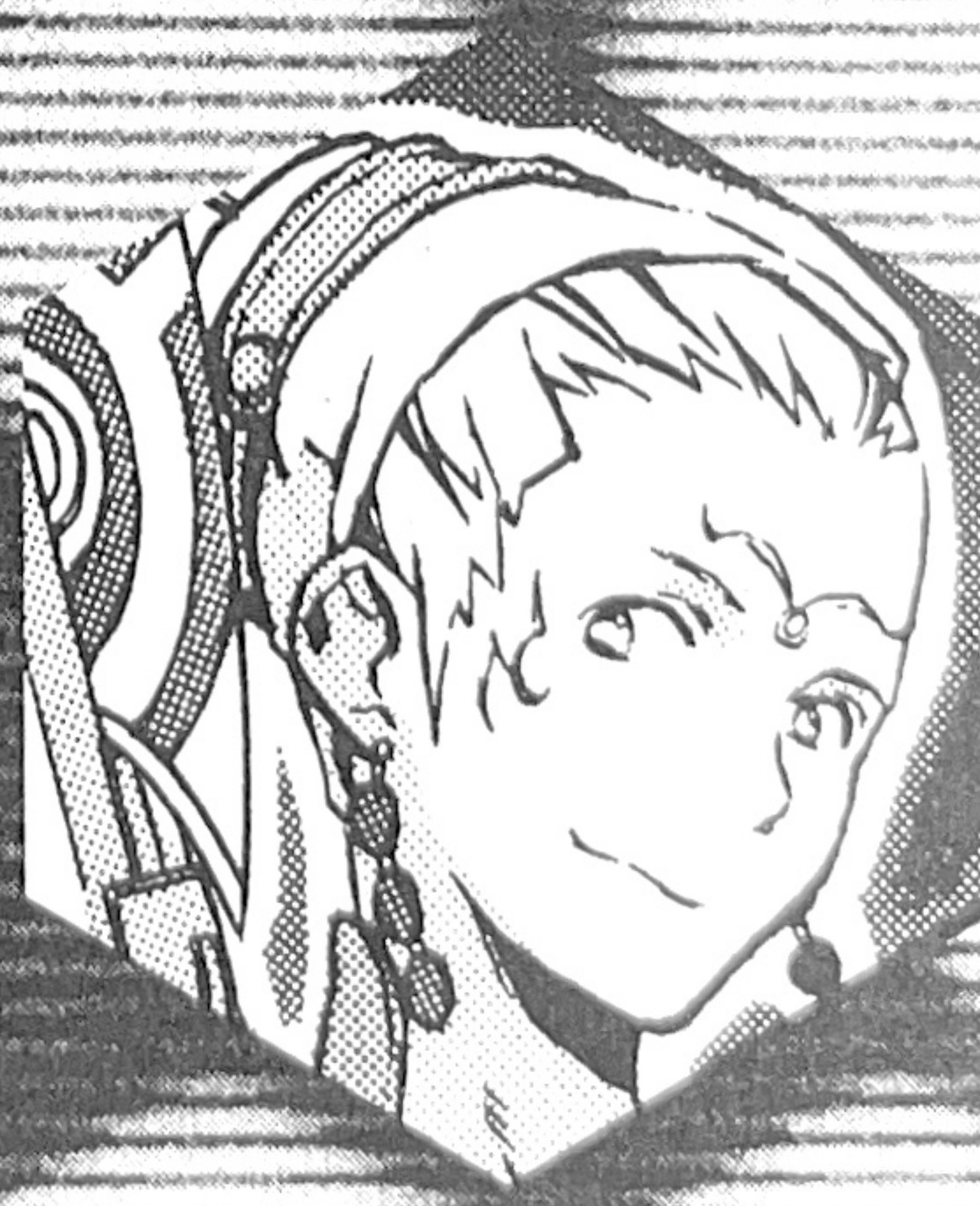
HASEO

PKK, The Terror of Death. Is chasing the PKer, Tri-Edge, after he made Shino fall unconscious. Epitaph User of Avatar, Skeith.



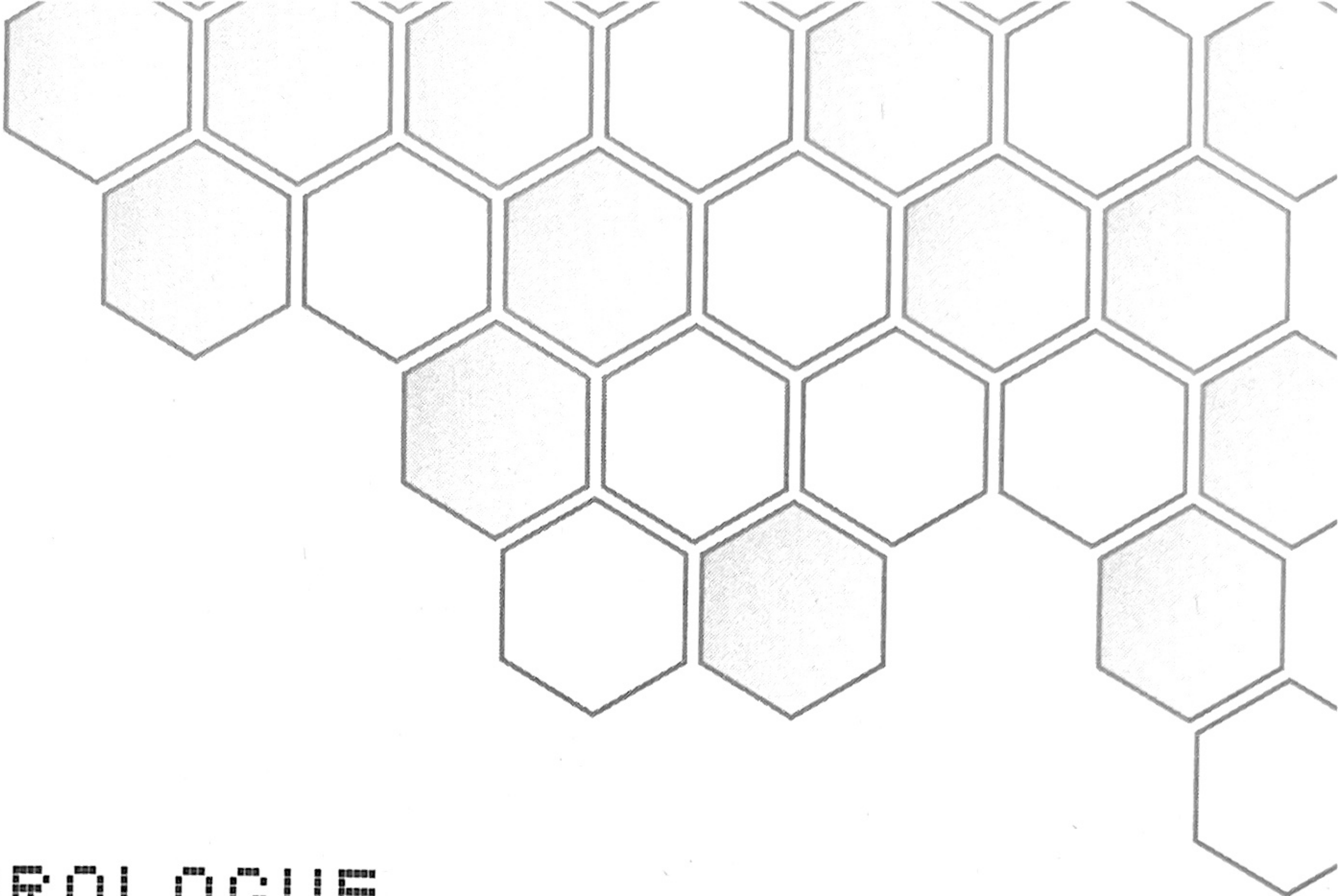
PI

An engineer of The World, employed by CC Corp. Epitaph User of Taryos, The Avenger.



KUHN

A young man who wants to do what is right. Saved Haseo from the mysterious ALDA. Epitaph User of Magus, The Propagation.



PROLOGUE

SUMMER 2017

The largest Internet game, *The World R:2*, is in turmoil after several strange incidents involving players falling unconscious during play.

The mysterious AIDA virus has been using the network as a means for mass infection. As the number of infected players continues to escalate, even CyberConnect Corporation's leader of Project G.U. has been turned into a Lost One.

The situation has taken a sudden turn for the worse. The mysterious hacker, Ovan, has revealed his true identity. He holds the Eighth Epitaph, The Rebirth. His hacked left arm contains Tri-Edge, making him an AIDA-PC. He is defeating the Epitaph Users of Project G.U. one after the other. CC Corp is losing control over the system....

The World has an autonomy all its own. This story revolves around AIDA and the eight Epitaph Users directly involved with it.

The desires hidden within the boundary between their conscious and subconscious minds have led to the choices and consequences laid before them.

Shino Nanao asleep in that hospital was the only thing that was real. Visiting her was part of Ryo's daily routine.



Lost Grounds served as the borderlands of strange phenomenon. It was in one such Lost Ground that seventeen-year-old Ryo Misaki had finally discovered the true identity of Tri-Edge, the hated Player Killer (PKer) who had sent Shino into a coma. It was the Steam Gunner Ovan who was the former Guild Master of Haseo's old guild, the Twilight Brigade.

Ryo was lost in confusion by the betrayal of the man he had respected and held in awe. The Tri-Edge AIDA that was attached to Ovan's left arm had easily knocked out the Tribal Grappler Pi, the Blade Brandier Endrance and the Harvest Cleric Atoli. Even Haseo had crumbled to his knees before this man.

© HIDDEN FORBIDDEN SACRED CAPITAL
INVERTED CITY MEGIN FI

PROLOGUE

Corbenik was like a giant god. Haseo was transfixed by the image of this subconscious power running rampant. It sliced through the membrane of his heart, filling him with a disgustingly postulant sense of defeat. The Adept Rogue clad in black scale-like armor screamed out, defiling the Elves' sacred mausoleum. There was no mercy here.

It gave the appearance of being a ceremony involving human sacrifice. It was not about benevolence, but a love far greater than that.

"White daisies." They represented hope.

Ovan had left his Avatar state and returned to a Steam Gunner. Those words filled Ryo with fatigue as the painful reality hit home. Those flowers had been in Shino's room.

"Shino loved those flowers, but I bet you didn't know that." Ovan's player had certainly known. He knew all about how Ryo Misaki had confessed his love half a year ago in Ikebukuro and how Shino Nanao had gently turned him away. Ovan knew a Shino who Ryo didn't know. Did Shino keep a part of herself hidden from everyone except Ovan?

This was outrageous. The Guild Master who Haseo had always admired was the one who had PKed the Harvest Cleric Shino in Hulle Granz Cathedral. That violent act had resulted in her slipping into a coma in the real world. Ovan had carved a sign on her and toyed with both the real world and the Net. And then he went and sent Shino flowers!

That was the truth.

The character Ryo had spent half a year leveling-up had been reformatted. Everything he thought made sense had been thrown up-side down.

Why had Ovan attacked Shino?! It didn't make sense.

The blood draining from Haseo's severed arm and leg made Ryo feel like his wounds were burning, despite the fact that his actual body was unharmed. It felt as if an overwhelming power had cut through his nerves, veins, tendons, muscles, bone and anything else that had been in the way. Was this what it felt like when people of old were executed by having their legs torn off by two opposing carts? The shock his brain had undergone nearly killed him. The waves of agony came without end.

Ryo felt the pain because Epitaph Users were mentally linked together with their PCs. Epitaph Users were connected with their PCs through something other than just a display screen and a controller. Whenever Haseo took an attack from an Avatar or something related to AIDA, the pain his PC felt was relived through the player, Ryo. That was what caused the pain.

"You're a freak." This pain was probably identical to what Shino Nanao had been forced to endure.

Haseo stood up. He was terrified. He was terrified that Shino would be stolen from him in both the real world and on the Net. That fear made Ryo—no, Haseo, stand back up. The feelings of despair, regret, sorrow and rage welled up within him and filled his eyes as he glared at Ovan. His blood boiled as if stoked by a fire. If Ryo wasn't careful, his power could make his entire body burn to a crisp.

PROLOGUE

Ryo was the only one who had the right to care for Shino. He was the only one who had the right to save her!

Skeith! That was the Shino-shaped emptiness in his heart. It was the power he so craved. Skeith was so sharp it seemed like it could easily cut anyone down by just looking at the shimmering silver crescent-moon shaped blade.

Ovan merely laughed. "Are you afraid of me, or are you afraid of Shino?"

This calm, strong, beautiful and intellectual beast could read Haseo's heart like an open book. Ryo cared for Ovan as much as he hated him, loved him as much as he feared him. There was only one man in the whole world who accepted Ryo and understood him. Ovan was the only man with whom Haseo could direct his blade-like emotions.

"I won't let you take Shino!" Those words gave him strength.

Haseo raised Skeith and slashed with it wildly. When the giant scythe's blade dug into Ovan's chest, the trickster's world that had been blessed by both Aura and AIDA unfolded in a blazing flash of light.



It was a white room in which leather-bound books were scattered across the floor. A large rocking chair was facing the opposite direction. Ovan was standing in front of the chair. Ryo had shrunk back from the light, so it took him a moment to realize what he was seeing.

Was this ... Ovan's memories?

He was in Avatar Space. It was a borderland between the Epitaph Users when their Avatars touched each other in The World. It was a place where Epitaph Users shared their memories.

"The Key of the Twilight," Ovan said. It sounded like he was about to tell a story. He was telling someone a story. That implied that there was someone sitting in that rocking chair.

"The Key of the Twilight, the ultimate AI, the Eight Phases of Morganna and Harald Hoerwick," he said as he removed his glasses and stooped over the chair. His expression was one of sadness and pure love.

"What melody would you like me to play—?"



The memory came to an abrupt end, cutting Ovan off before he finished his sentence. Ryo's mind had been blocked from Avatar Space.

Where the heck was that white room? Who was sitting in that rocking chair?

"Is that all you've got?" Ovan asked, standing directly in front of Haseo. Although Skeith was still stuck in Ovan's chest, it didn't seem to faze him.

When an Avatar attacked the PC, the player would feel pain in the real world. As things stood now, Ryo was suffering awful pain due to Haseo having lost both an arm and a leg.

"Ovan, you—"

"I can't feel anything."

PROLOGUE

It was as though he was impervious to pain. Unlike all of the other Epitaph Users, Ovan's player hadn't experienced an increase in sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch or even the sixth sense.

"As such, I cannot use The Rebirth's true power. I awoke as an Epitaph User and gained the ability to use my Avatar. But since I cannot feel pain, I am unable to improve and reach greater heights."

Ovan stepped forward with Skeith still lodged in his chest. The blade plunged deeper into him until it reached the scythe's snath. Yet the irregular Steam Gunner was unfazed, like an immortal hero who was invincible against even the strongest of weapons.

The Tri-Edge AIDA arm that grew out of Ovan's left shoulder floated threateningly in front of Haseo's face.

"Ngh...." Ryo flinched, making Haseo stagger backward.

"I'm after the same thing you are: pain. Pain experienced on both the Net and real life will help me realize my goal. Haseo, I thought you would be the one, but I see you aren't ready yet." Ovan spoke his words of resignation as he calmly pulled Skeith out of his body.

Haseo merely stood there, unable to do anything.

"I hereby disband the Twilight Brigade."

"You're what?" Why the heck was he bringing up the Twilight Brigade now?

"My adventure was in vain. I tried to fill the world with the light of reason in my search for the gods, but it was fruitless." At the end of his adventure, he'd come to the Inverted City Megin Fi only

to find that the Heavenly Path wasn't there.

"You mean the Twilight Brigade's journey is over?"

"Unlike Yata, I have no intention of observing and experimenting in hopes of finding the goddess's laws." That went against the policies that CC Corp's upper management held so firmly. Ovan was all alone now. It seemed his conscious mind was trying to protect itself with a hard shell. He was like a clam closed tight.

Ovan was the picture of a man in despair.

"Then what are you going to do now?" Ryo wondered if Ovan was going to continue deceiving others and sacrificing people for his own benefit.

"There is no ultimate truth. Everything is meaningless. How can a person who neither knows himself nor pain speak of false truths?"

As he spoke of despair, it seemed as though he were underwater, trying to use logic to help him steal the reflection of the moon. It didn't matter to him that it was impossible for anyone on Earth to obtain.

"No, I know what I shall do. I shall bend those very truths to my will." He would force Aura to bend to him.

As Ovan spoke of outrageous things, the shell surrounding his conscious mind began to open once more. It released billions of eggs of thought into the sea of data.

Ryo was unable to mentally keep pace with Ovan and his quickly changing attitude.

PROLOGUE

"There's no way!"

"I am The Rebirth, Corbenik," Ovan declared. "I will become a god."

He allowed Tri-Edge to loosen its savage grip upon Haseo, but only to beat Haseo like someone would beat a dirty rag. His body grew numb to the pain as his consciousness faded. His mind was no longer able to form clear thoughts.

"What do you think it means to grow?" Ovan whispered on a sigh, allowing the Tri-Edge AIDA arm to continue its assault as if it were a dog playing with a toy.

"Everyone praises you if they think you've grown. It's almost a crime not to grow and mature. But you'll be criticized and reproached if you don't grow into the image everyone has of you. Is growing into the form everyone desires and yearns for truly all that wonderful?"

Was this the justification of the man who had boasted that he would become a god? Was this how he was going to justify what could and would happen as he took the story into a direction no one desired?

I... Ryo just wanted to get back everything he had lost.

"That was why I struggled and fought so hard," he whispered groggily. All that came out was a gurgling noise when he tried to talk.

"Isn't growth merely recovering what was lost?" Ovan continued. "In that case, growth is rather underwhelming and not something worthy of praise. It certainly isn't something people should celebrate."

I... Haseo had never dreamed of meeting the expectations of others. He had never sought admiration he did not deserve.

"In fact, they should keep their mouths shut about it altogether. Others watching you as you grow and mature would be an intolerably embarrassing experience."

Ryo's painfully underdeveloped conscious mind was laid bare in the form of Haseo. Haseo exposed his "self," and reflected it for all to see. In a way, tracing one form of himself over the other was an outright embarrassment for Ryo Misaki, who served as the subconscious mind.

But even so...

"Become strong," Ovan said in a saccharine tone as he continued to lynch Haseo. Despite his encouraging words, he peered mercilessly down at Haseo through his tinted glasses. "Become strong, Haseo. Devour and trample all of your feelings of happiness and sadness as you move forward."

An image of Shino when she was looking her best appeared in Ryo's mind.

Shino....

"Kill me! Fill me with the delicious wine called *pain*," Ovan hissed. He sounded like a big brother, a father and also a demon.

Haseo's gaze wandered pathetically around the mausoleum. The weak light wavered in his vision. Everything sounded so distant. The marble floor was like ice as it sucked away the warmth of life. The Elves, who had made this mausoleum, had depicted their ancient legend through a mosaic inlay on the domed ceiling.

PROLOGUE



The Elves were blessed by the gods, making them more powerful, more intelligent, and more beautiful than all other life.

Sol, God of Creation, bequeathed the land to the Elves before he created the City of Dawn, Airceltraí, and rose to the heavens. The gods ruled the heavens and the Elves ruled the land.

The Heavenly Path connected Heaven and Earth. The gods nourished the earth whenever they left their loft to visit the land.

It was believed that the Elves would prosper for all time.

Only the God of Death, Cernunnos, refused to bless the Elves. As such, the Elves' hearts shone with light for they were ignorant of the darkness called "death." Not only were the Elves stronger, smarter and more beautiful than all other living creatures, they had also never learned to fear the darkness. It was only natural for them to believe they were superior.

But as the years passed, they became arrogant, claiming that their power surpassed that of the gods. They invaded Heaven for they held little opinion of the gods. Sol was furious at them for their treachery and retracted all of the blessings that had been bestowed upon the Elves. As a result, the Elves became more fragile and less intelligent than their fellow creatures. Now they were pathetic and weak.

Myulin, the Goddess of Harvest, renamed the Elves for what they had become: humans, the pathetic ones.



It was the image of catastrophe.

Black tar-like bubbles plastered the Epitaph Users Atoli, Pi and Endrance on top of the colorful mosaic-encrusted mausoleum ceiling. It looked as though everyone was unconscious. They didn't utter a sound.

Haseo looked up at his friends after he had just been beaten mercilessly. His eyes rolled into the back of his head as he fell flat on his back like a corpse.

"How pathetic," Ovan said in a soft voice.

Ovan sounded just like he had in days gone by. Haseo had run into some nasty newbie hunters the very first day he had logged on *The World R:2*. Ovan had come and rescued Haseo after he'd gotten PKed.

"Welcome to The World."

The thought that even their first encounter had been contrived flashed through Ryo's mind. Ovan had hired those newbie hunters to go after Haseo. But Ovan had betrayed them in the end. Everything had been a setup, clear since the beginning.

It was a groundless fantasy, but Ryo didn't need evidence to doubt someone. Doubt could stop rational thought, transforming a person into an incompetent monkey. Ovan had said, "Welcome." Ovan had been waiting for him. By appearing as a savior, he had instantly become someone Ryo could respect. He served as a fatherly archetype in *The World*. He had done it so he could control Ryo's mind and body.

PROLOGUE

“A man’s archetype of a woman is called ‘anima.’ Oh, why do you look so anguished? This isn’t all that difficult to comprehend. It’s the root of the word ‘animation.’ In Latin it means ‘soul.’

“For instance, the animalistic anima in men is what makes them drool over pictures of women in graphic magazines. It is a form of recognition that the women are the subject of the opposite gender. That anima is a way to vent physical sexual attraction. The second level then progresses to the romantic anima, which forms the image of the ideal lover. Helen of Troy, Juliet from Shakespeare and any number of heroines from various stories fall into that category.

“The next level moves on to the sacred image of the maternal figure, Maria. The last level is Sophia, which represents wisdom in women. That is how the male perspective of the female archetypes is broken up. In short, the anima is nothing more than how men fantasize women. Would Shino be your anima?”

Ovan pointed to the ceiling. He was implying that the reason the Harvest Cleric Atoli had managed to shake Ryo so badly was because she strongly overlapped with his anima, Shino.

“The female anima breaks our male personas. Men work hard to form iron-hard pride and bigoted philosophies. Our social status and rank is more valuable to us than life itself. But the moment a man falls in love with a woman, everything he spent his life working toward crumbles away like sand. Even if women publicly reveal things about men that they abhor, the men can’t help but seek to be with women. Men seek the anima.

"That's why we want power." He wanted power like what Kite had possessed seven years ago.

Ovan's words reminded Ryo of the Banshouya Files he had read over and over again. Seven years ago in 2010, the PC of a boy Twin Blade named Kite had put an end to the Second Network Crisis. Naturally, *The World* had been the source of the catastrophe. Kite's deed was never made public and this part of history was buried within the network. But Kite was a hero. He was the hero archetype of the perfect man who could do anything.

Abhhh. If Ryo could, he wanted to bury his face in his hands and delve into despair.

"Haseo, as I look at you in your wretched, fallen state, I realize how pathetic you are. I'm sure there are some who would happily belittle you, telling you how you've failed to grow compared to Kite." Ovan's voice sounded fuzzy, like he was speaking through the other side of a radio. The narrower the link connecting Ryo and Haseo grew, the louder the static noise became, making it hard to hear his own thoughts.

L... Ryo wanted to save the Lost Ones as Kite had. But he never once thought that he wanted to be praised as a hero. Ryo Misaki was just a normal seventeen-year-old high school student. To save the one he loved, he had sacrificed both an arm and a leg. He had been brutally beaten up. Both his mind and body had been injured. He had been forced to endure shame and embarrassment. Yet he still hadn't done enough. He still couldn't save her. He couldn't even protect those who were close to him. His dear friends had all fallen prey to Ovan's

PROLOGUE

left arm. He could never be a hero after having lost so much. It was unacceptable. No one would ever follow him.

How long should he fight? How much should he sacrifice?

"No matter how many puzzle pieces you have, you'll never see the picture if the pieces don't fit together," Ovan said to the unmoving Haseo.

Hub...?

"Why don't you try destroying everything? The pieces of truth will tease you by breaking into even smaller pieces, but you may gain a different view of that very truth. However, this method is full of complications.

"My goal was to speak with the ultimate AI, Aura. I was going to analyze the black box left behind by the creator of *The World*, Harald Hoerwick. My only clues were Emma Wielant's 'The Epitaph of Twilight' and the story of the hero Kite, which was recorded in the Banshouya Files. Those were the only useful texts available to me. I also collected *The World's* logs, which had scattered across the network and the real world.

"Rummaging through Balbol Museum's archives reminded me of my school days when I was studying for entrance exams. Could my imagination surpass that of Harald's? If I was mentally capable of figuring out what Harald's archetype was, I could finally meet Aura.

"There was only one thing I could think of that would lead me to my goal. It had been tried and proven in the past. It was the Morganna System, which had served as the womb for the ultimate

AI, Aura, seven years ago. Under the assumption that it was reversible and reproducible, I began collecting the Morganna Factors. I drew together the eight people who carried Epitaphs—the Epitaph Users. I figured all eight Epitaphs would need to be activated. Since there is no clear-cut way to make someone awaken to their Avatar, I couldn't just defeat them and get what I wanted like in a video game. I had to review the possibilities and test them through trial and error. It was a horrible game.

“But I never relied on other people's interpretations and hypotheses. Who said I had to obey some instruction manual to put the puzzle together? Who said I had to follow some mistake-ridden strategy guide to beat the game?

“I decided to make a guild—the Twilight Brigade. I invited you into the guild, talked to you like you were an adult, gave you Shino and then stole her away. I took everything away from you and left you naked. When you became a PKK, I spread the word that your nickname was the Terror of Death.

“I didn't have any proof that what I was doing was right. There were people who laughed at me, saying I was a weird attention hog. But, you see, there was no battle strategy for this scenario. No one knew the answer to my problems, or even how to go about solving them. From the moment I decided I wanted to meet Aura, I had become a criminal sentenced to 'freedom.' As such, I did not have the option to fear failure, mockery or the unknown. I couldn't sit and wait for some nice person to give me all of the answers like a chick with its mouth open waiting to be fed.

PROLOGUE

"*The World* accepted me because of its autonomy. And then there was you, Haseo. I got you and awoke you to your Avatar. That was the first step. Now that I think about it, the Twilight Brigade was truly an initiation ground for you," Ovan said as he held a monologue following the journey he had undergone. Ovan was explaining the meaning behind what they had done together half a year ago. He explained the Twilight Brigade's purpose. Ovan gently unraveled Haseo's tangled thoughts.

It was all an initiation.

"In the past and present, East and West, every culture has a custom where they make men of a certain age leave their families and live together under one roof. Once the boys reach a certain age, they are forced to leave their village and live together as a group for a certain amount of time. There they associate with the ladies. In Japan there was a group called the *Wakamono-gumi* Youth Group. It existed until the Meiji Era in the late 1800s and some branches of it still exist today.

"For countries that have mandatory military service, their isolation was represented by the time they spent in the service. In some Buddhist countries like Thailand, all men leave their homes at least once to serve in a temple. In New Guinea they have a ritual where young boys leave home to receive semen from their elders to help them mature into adult men.

"There are military services, religious services, and organizations that teach boys how to behave like men. There are also cultural practices that deal with sexual development. These are all examples

of the same thing. Although they may vary slightly, those variants are of little importance. The boys are dead while they undergo their initiation."

"They're dead?" Haseo croaked as he gurgled on blood, drowning in agony.

"As far as society is concerned, the boys are dead. Your school considers you dead the way you coop yourself up in your room at home. Whether you're literally dead or alive has little impact on anyone. Therefore, Ryo Misaki is dead."

There was a part of Ryo that could not deny what Ovan was saying. Ryo had thrown away the majority of his life in the real world so that he could live as Haseo.

Ovan continued, "While living in those groups outside of society, the boys must undergo some sort of ceremony in order to be acknowledged as adults and return to the real world. Often the initiation ceremony is filled with peril. It could be anything from bungee jumping to fighting a lion. For someone enlisted in the army, it could be fighting in a war. There are times the young men die, preventing them from ever returning home. You're familiar with *Snow White*, aren't you?"

Snow White was a story almost everyone knows.

"Ryo Misaki, you're a reasonably intelligent high schooler. I'm sure you know how *Grimm's Fairy Tales* was published in the nineteenth century. It was a collection of folktales gathered from all across Germany. You're probably also aware that each new edition of the book has been modified. It was really the something-or-other *Grimm's Fairy Tales*.

PROLOGUE

“Now then, on to *Snow White*. In the original Grimm publication, the cruel queen was not a stepmother, but her biological mother. At Snow White’s wedding ceremony, she made her mother dance in red-hot iron slippers until she died. In different versions of the story, the way the queen meets her demise varies. Since Snow White killing the queen doesn’t sit well with modern-day morals, it has been changed so that the queen is driven to her own death. If I recall correctly, in the Disney version the seven dwarves chased the queen up a cliff, where she fell to her doom.

“Finding differences or ‘mistakes’ in the stories is very easy. It’s a fun game even children can play. But doing so is of little value. It comes from children’s strong sense of justice and their desire to not lie. Unfortunately it also comes about from their lack of dynamic intelligence. They only discuss things as they see them.

“Now then, a prince suddenly appears and rescues Snow White. There are numerous variations on how the princess is made to spit out the poisoned apple. In one version she spat it out because the prince’s vassal stumbled under the weight of the glass coffin and made it shake. In another version the vassal got so angry over how heavy the coffin was that he punched the princess. In the Disney version, the prince’s kiss magically brought her back. In fact, *Snow White* could be categorized as a spin-off of *Sleeping Beauty*.

“Allow me to summarize *Snow White* in a single paragraph. A young lady leaves her family and society to live in a different world. While there, she dies and is reborn. There are also seven dwarves who live as a group in the forest. The young lady serves as

a temporary mother figure and is shared equally amongst the men. Well, there you have one generally accepted cultural anthropological explanation of the story.”

“The boy/girl dies and is reborn as a man/woman,” Ovan added with emphasis before continuing. “The dead princess is reborn. Anyone can experience rebirth and it doesn’t need to be as miraculous as Jesus’s reincarnation or necromancy. There are countless variations to the story. But going by the general outline for *Sleeping Beauty*, the prince clearly rapes the sleeping princess. In some versions, this necrophiliac-like act even impregnates her. He’s just like you, Haseo.”

“What...?” If Ryo could see himself in a mirror, he would see that his face was bright red in embarrassment.

“You’re continually scaling the cursed white tower and raping Princess Shino Nanao as she sleeps in a bed of thorns.”

“What the hell?” Rage gave the nearly dead Haseo the strength to move. Ryo had never so much as touched Shino Nanao as she slept. He had done nothing more than watch from afar as a nurse brushed Shino’s hair.

Ovan burst into laughter. “Thank you for the response I had been anticipating. Heh heh.... Don’t be so shy. It doesn’t matter how gallant a knight you *think* you are.”

“Cut the crap!” Since Haseo only had one arm and one leg, he had to lean on Skeith for support as he stumbled to a standing position.

“I’d say you’ve hurt her dignity plenty by staring into her sleeping face without her permission. At any rate, it’s all part of

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bringing back a girl who has died as far as society is concerned. I'll say it again. 'A young lady leaves her family and society to live in a different world. While there, she dies and is reborn.'"

It was a story about a cursed sleeping princess and her cursed prince.

"The curse is supposed to represent death," Ovan continued. "Even Sleeping Beauty has to return to the real world eventually. She's just like you, *Prince Haseo*."

"Are you saying Shino's like me?" It didn't make sense. He couldn't accept it.

Ryo had confessed his love for Shino. Shino had gently turned him down. The one who fell first was always the loser in the game of love. After all, falling in love was a sign of weakness. Ryo had sought after her and ended up losing everything. He was acting out a sad, one-man play with his broken heart.

"If you want to save Shino, you must first save yourself, Haseo." Ovan's words were meant to guide the young man and held a hint of kindness in them. "Your 'self' has become openly naked now that your conscious mind (Haseo) and your subconscious mind (you, the player) have become one. You were a top student on track for college with well-to-do parents. But now you've lost the shield and support you used to protect yourself.

"You have an extraordinarily liminal existence. You have two different personalities, yet don't truly belong to either world they're from. You're unstable, but because of it you've become one who lives on borders. You belong to both sides of various coins as you live in

the real world and the Net and are both a boy and a man. You need to be creative and intelligent to venture such uncharted mechanics. That's why you've been maturing."

It was as if the dam holding Ovan's tongue had been broken as he grew philosophical. He was like an obstinate professor talking about things that went over his students' heads.

"G.U. stands for 'Grow Up.' It's all about maturing," Ovan spat. "I hate that phrase and how irresponsibly it's used." The irregular Steam Gunner turned away from Haseo, as if put in an ill-temper by his own choice of words.

Haseo looked at the back of the man he had always admired. Something strange was growing on his left arm. It was the Tri-Edge AIDA. It was Ovan's dangerous friend who had killed Shino.

Was this what Ovan's player had wanted to become?

Ovan looked up at the mausoleum ceiling. "Haseo, I like you. Stay just as inept as you are. No matter how angry I may make you and no matter how badly you may want to kill me, I can always trust you."

The Heavenly Path he had sought for so desperately wasn't here. There was no path to the City of Dawn, Airceltra. The path to the ultimate AI, Aura, had been shut off from him. So Ovan decided to change his plans dramatically. He claimed he would become god of *The World*.

"What are you trying to do?" Ryo asked with trembling lips.

But of course, the weirdo failed to answer his question and instead said, "I am Ovan and you are Haseo. Because we are PCs

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and because we are on the Net, *The World* lays us naked for all to see. It's because we lose everything we have in the real world. It makes us grow tense and allows us to easily hurt each other's feelings."

Living on the border of two worlds could only bring about pain.

"I'm running out of time," Ovan said and raised his left arm.

The Tri-Edge AIDA gave out a cry like some sort of strange bug. Black strings covered with black bubbles quickly spread throughout the mausoleum like bacteria spawning in fast-forward.

It was destroying everything. The mosaic broke loose and fell to the ground—the legend of the Elves was now lost. The trickster was destroying the background story for *The World R:2*. Since Ovan wanted to become a god, he had to make everyone bow to his will, including CC Corp, Emma Wielant's "The Epitaph of Twilight," and even the creator of the game, Harald Hoerwick.

Ovan was devouring their story. Since he understood the game better than all others, he could surpass and conquer it within mere moments. It was his ceremony for making a new break.

He was outright destroying the lost Elven holy capital and the island in the sky, the petrified Battle Dragon Mag Mell. He was even destroying the bog in the old battlefield, Coite-Bodher. Tri-Edge's black arm was devouring *The World's* game data. It did it in a way that those who lived there would never notice. It started from under the ground and through pillars. The way it spawned was clever, akin to how termites build their nests.

"I will protect you," Ovan said softly.

What Ovan had just said didn't seem to make sense. It was impossible for Ryo to keep up with him. Haseo simply gazed at Ovan despite his blurred vision.

"Haseo, I will silence any foolish primates who dare spit at you or laugh at you as you trod pathetically down your path. I swear I will. I swear on Shino in that hospital bed, I will never leave you." Ovan's player said that in a neutral voice Ryo had never heard him use before. "So kill me."

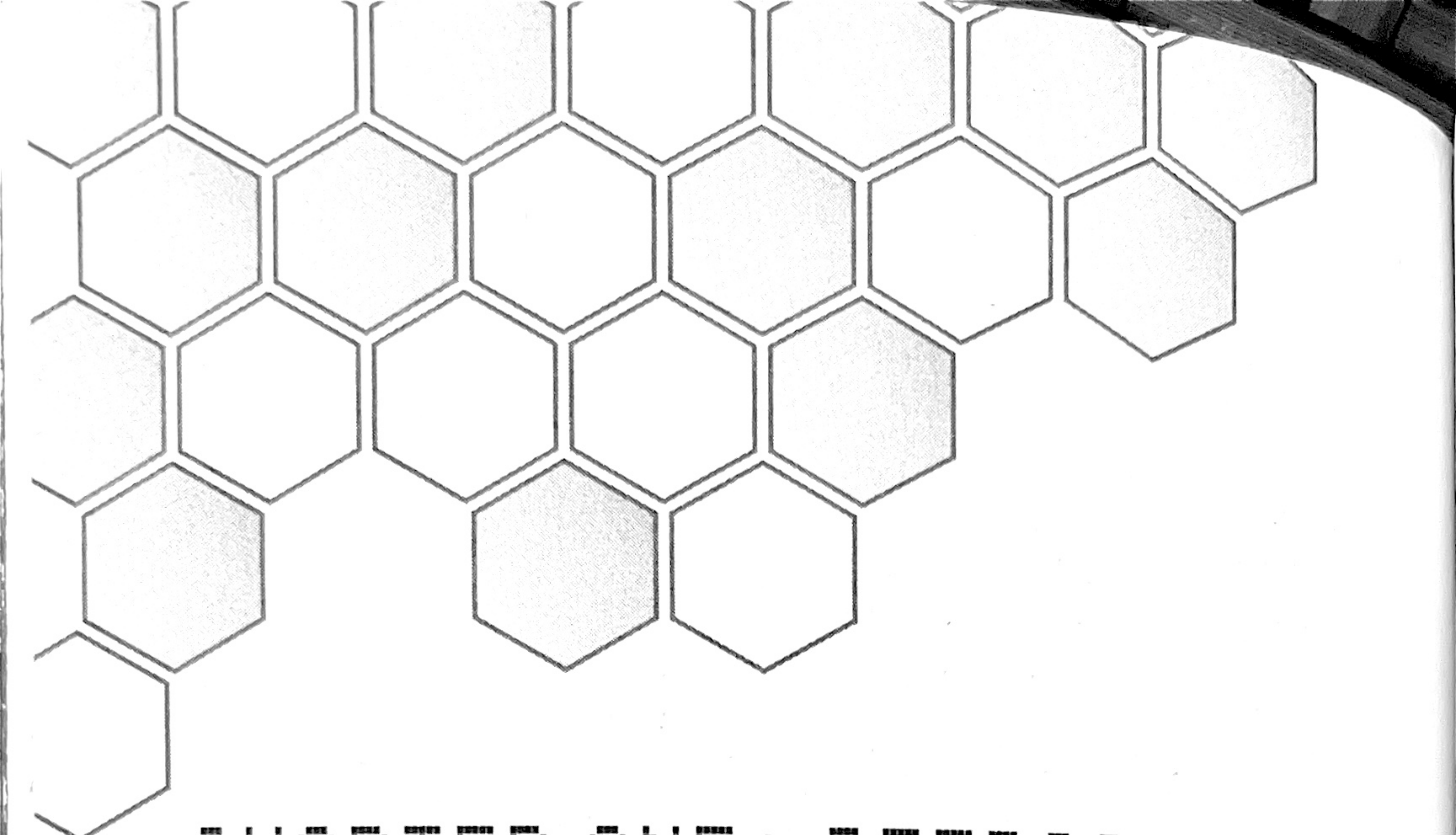
Like Atlas supporting the heavens, Corbenik's shadow stood between Heaven and Earth.

The world grew dark until Ryo finally lost consciousness.

There is only the mind.

—Harald's Note





CHAPTER ONE : DEFrag

ONE

Takumi Hino was asleep on a hospital bed. He was hooked up to medical equipment worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. He was also being watched twenty-four hours a day. He was kept alive by the liquid-filled tubes attached all over his body.

Takumi was the leader of CC Corp's anti-AIDA team, Project G.U. He had watched over *The World* like none other with his integrated surveillance system, the Serpent of Lore. But now he was just another victim, receiving treatment from a medical team dressed in green.

If anything was certain, it was that Takumi Hino's heart was no longer in his seventeen-year-old body.

You've become one with The World, Reiko Saeki thought to herself as she looked down at Takumi, who lay naked on the hospital bed. His body was lean, like that of a boxer's. Takumi lived by himself in

a high-rise apartment in Tokyo and had frequented the gym daily. Nonetheless, Takumi had abandoned his well-tempered body.

Takumi Hino had earned his degree in his teens and had purchased several shares of stock in CyberConnect Japan. Yet this seventeen-year-old boy had given it all up without a second thought. He had abandoned his life as Takumi Hino. He had even abandoned his PC, Yata, which he had spent countless hours with in his beloved *The World*.

All of that had lost its value to him. He had become one with *The World*. It was like becoming one with God. It was something every theologian desired.

You were obsessed with knowledge....

Takumi Hino was just too intelligent. Wealth and success on the social ladder could never fulfill him. If he had needed a woman, Reiko may have been able to heal his heart. But Takumi only wanted to be blessed by the sacred light of the ultimate AI, Aura. It was something he could never so much as touch.

According to the Serpent of Lore logs that upper management had just released, Ovan had infiltrated the Serpent of Lore. As a result of their encounter, Yata had awoken as the Epitaph User for the Fourth Phase: The Prophet, Fidchell. It was a shock to Reiko—his subordinate—that he hadn't awoken before then. The possibility had simply never crossed her mind.

The PC, Yata, had been lost from the system and its player, Takumi Hino, had been added to the list of Lost Ones. Takumi was sealed within *The World* as The Prophet on a sheet of parchment

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paper. As if part of some allegory, he had become a magic *item*.

Couldn't it be said that this was a case of bodily injury and that Ovan's player had used AIDA as the weapon? If she could prove that AIDA was a lethal weapon, couldn't he be charged for physically harming another? It would change the AIDA phenomenon from an outbreak of some sort of mysterious virus to a crime committed by the man named Ovan.

Reiko herself had fought against Ovan with his Tri-Edge arm back in the Inverted City Megin Fi. She had nearly become a Lost One in that battle. Pi, Atoli and Endrance were lucky that they were only unconscious for a short time. Their powers as Epitaph Users had helped them resist going into a coma. However, the main reason they weren't in a coma was probably because that hadn't been Ovan's intent.

He could have killed us whenever he wanted. Ovan was like a trickster as he laughed at them. He had planted fear within the minds of the Epitaph Users.

What should I do? Reiko fretted and turned her thoughts back on herself.

Reiko's brother was the original leader of Project G.U. She had inherited Jun Banshouya's will to keep the network a safe place. That's why she had accepted CC Corp's offer to join Project G.U. And then she had met Yata. The boy was a good seven years younger than her, but his skill, knowledge and experience all surpassed her own. As such, she was truly able to think of him as her superior. Plus, Reiko didn't care to argue over something as

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petty as superiority in the workplace.

The Yata she had always depended upon was no longer here. He wasn't in this body.

He's smiling. Reiko felt horribly sad. She couldn't help but feel that Takumi Hino was slightly smiling as he lay on that bed.



"Looks good to me," said Chigusa Kusaka's doctor as he brought her exam to an end. The smile he gave her filled Chigusa with relief.

Chigusa lived in Chiba, but was receiving treatment at a large hospital in Tokyo because of her sudden loss of hearing. The trip took about an hour each way, but if things continued to progress as they were, she may not have to come as frequently once school started up again in the fall.

Dr. Kurogai had been very kind to her. He was only around thirty years old with a handsome face and a gentle demeanor. Chigusa imagined he was popular with the lady nurses. Although she knew how silly this was of her, she couldn't help but feel that having a doctor closer to her own age had made the whole experience less stressful than if it had been some highly-skilled, wrinkled-up elderly doctor.

The reason Chigusa had lost her hearing could be found within *The World*. Chigusa's PC, Atoli, was an Epitaph User. It had been infected by AIDA and then had its Morganna Factor

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stolen from it. She believed that the combination of those two events had made her lose her hearing in the real world but not in *The World*.

"Dr. Kurogai, you're a brain doct—I mean, you're a doctor who treats head problems, right?" Chigusa asked, pointing to her temple.

"Right. I'm a neurosurgeon."

"Did I have some kind of sickness in my brain that made me lose my hearing?"

The other day during the AIDA server incident at Moon Tree's headquarters, her PC, Atoli, had regained its Innis Factor. The AIDA infecting the PC had also been terminated. That was when Chigusa had regained her hearing. Exams since then had shown no sign of any abnormalities. She had fully recuperated. Of course, the idea that she had lost her hearing because of an online game probably never even crossed Dr. Kurogai's mind.

"Didn't you contact an ears, nose, and throat specialist?"

"I asked for his opinion on why you suddenly lost your hearing and then regained it."

Chigusa wondered how someone would medically diagnose her loss of hearing when *The World* was the real culprit.

"To be honest," Dr. Kurogai said, "he didn't know. Neither of us knows why you lost your hearing, or how you got it back. If someone said you feigned the whole thing, I'd have to agree with them."

"Like I was pretending I couldn't hear?"

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"Right. You *believed* that you had lost your hearing, or something along those lines. But the tests proved that you weren't reacting to sound whatsoever." Dr. Kurogai smiled bitterly. He felt ashamed as a doctor that this was the best he could come up with.

"I see.... That's kinda scary."

"How so?"

"I don't know if the same thing will happen again," Chigusa said and lowered her gaze.

Honestly, all she had to do was never log into *The World* ever again. If she destroyed that PC, then she could cut her hated link with the Morganna Factor and AIDA.

But I can't.... Nor did she intend to. *The World* meant everything to Chigusa Kusaka. Chigusa's personality was undeniably getting taken over by the personality she had created in that online world as Atoli. There were even times she wished she could teleport into that world. Chigusa could understand why Yata was happy as a mere item in that world, as a piece of parchment paper.

Chigusa wanted to become her game character. Adults would probably ridicule her and say that such desires belonged to immature children who couldn't differentiate between reality and virtual reality.

They don't know. They don't really care. That's why they can say things like that. There was another world out there.

"Are you going to continue playing *The World*?" Dr. Kurogai asked.

"Huh? Oh, yes, I am."

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Dr. Kurogai knew that Chigusa was playing *The World*. She had told him how she could read the message text in the voice chats, so she was playing to console herself over her hearing loss. Of course, she never told her doctor or her parents about how she could actually hear while playing *The World*.

"With school starting up soon, try not to overdo it," Dr. Kurogai said.

Chigusa numbly ignored the doctor's words of concern toward his patient.



Ryo Misaki realized that he loved Shino. When he had lost her, he realized that he loved her even more than he knew. He couldn't explain where these feelings came from. If he put a reason to them, they would become a common lie. Immature words were a neat, blunt, assertive and inconvenient way to spell out one's own feelings.

Ryo could see the bright blue sky and white clouds through the thin curtains. Those clouds symbolized the end of summer. It had been dreadfully hot ever since August hit. The heat wave had been going on for over two weeks. The Kanto Area in the west had turned into a heat belt. Elsewhere there were towns suffering from floods as water built up from constant squall-like torrential rains. In the southern part of Kyushu there was an outbreak of the Malaria virus. Where had he learned this news?

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He might have read it in the newspapers available in the hospital waiting room.

It was a summer without Shino.

The summer was too lively. The Shino-shaped void was drawn sharply in his memories. He had spent this hot season in *The World*. He had been so absorbed in the game that he could hardly remember anything else. Apparently people's brains forgot about things that were deemed unimportant.

Now his lost summer was coming to a close. He couldn't turn back the hands of time. The vase of white daisies adorning the hospital room had withered and died.

"Shino...." Ryo was still visiting Shino Nanao in the hospital.

Half a year ago, Shino's PC had been PKed by the PC called Tri-Edge while playing *The World*. The PK had caused Shino Nanao to fall into a comatose state. For Tri-Edge to be able to do that, Ryo figured he was an AIDA-PC. In the end, his guess had been right. Ryo had merely mistaken Tri-Edge's true identity.

Tri-Edge was Ovan.

"Shino, did you know...?"

Shino and Ovan were both fellow members of the guild called the Twilight Brigade. They had adventured together and covered each other's backs.

Ryo didn't know what Shino thought of Haseo. No, he had to accept the truth. Ryo's feelings were undeniably one-sided. But even so, Ryo believed that they had done more than just chatted. They

had shared their hearts with one another.

Shino's words had filled Ryo with a sense of fulfillment. They had healed him. They had guided him. The same went for the Guild Master, Ovan. He had viewed Ovan as an older brother or father figure, if he believed what he had seen in the Lost Ground of Balbol Museum, which displayed one's conscious and subconscious minds. Likewise, he saw Shino as an older sister or mother figure.

Going by that, Haseo's father had killed his mother and stolen her away from him. His "father" had then told Haseo to kill him.

"Ovan PKed you and made you like this." Ryo hit Shino with the truth. Maybe that would help him steal Shino back from Ovan. Or was he just plain trying to steal her from him?

Shino remained silent.

Shino Nanao wasn't here. She wasn't inside this gaunt, damaged body. Since Shino was a Lost One, her soul was wandering about *The World*.

How much did Shino know? Was Shino facing away from Ovan when he killed her with the AIDA on his left arm? Or was she facing him?

Ryo looked down at Shino Nanao's face and was shocked to realize he couldn't really remember how she had looked. He could see her face as she slept, but the Shino before him was like an empty cicada shell. He could not seem to remember what Shino looked like the one time he met her in Ikebukuro. They hadn't taken pictures of each other on their cell phones or at a photo booth. Back then,

Ryo's mind had been preoccupied with how he was going to confess his love for her. The only thing he remembered about Shino was her clothes. He was probably looking down the whole time.

There was no turning back the hands of time. He had to remember her before she vanished completely. He had to do it before his memories were swept away in the torrents of time. It had to be done before this hot summer ended.

The same nurse as always came up to Ryo and greeted him. Ryo returned the greeting and got ready to leave the hospital room.

"The flowers have wilted," the nurse said as she touched the vase.

"Leave them."

"Huh?"

"She likes those flowers." Shino liked snow white daisies. "Someone dear to her sent those," Ryo added.

"Did you figure out who left them when they came to visit her?"

"Yeah, I think so," he answered.

Ryo left the hospital room. He looked out at the trees lining the streets through the glass window. He could always hear cicadas chirping from those trees.

I guess I should head back. He turned down the corridor and into the hallway. The Net was the only place to which he could return.

"Huh?!" He ran into someone as he turned a corner. They both stepped to their right and then their left to get out of the other's way, making them continue to run into each other.

"I'm sorry," the girl said in a small voice.

"It's noth—" Ryo started to say but cut himself short when he looked up at the girl. His eyes opened wide in surprise.

The high-school-aged girl picked up on Ryo's strange reaction and began looking around nervously.

"Atoli...?"

The girl jumped when Ryo said her name. She asked, "Haseo...?" The girl, Chigusa Kusaka, was at a loss for words. The same went for Ryo. He had seen a picture of Atoli's player, Chigusa Kusaka, once before. He had also gotten a glance at Chigusa in the real world when they had gone into Avatar Space together during the AIDA server incident at Moon Tree's headquarters.

Ryo knew exactly what Chigusa was doing here. Atoli had discussed it with him once a while back. She had told him she was receiving treatment at a hospital far from where she lived.

"Kusaka...." Just as he was about to start up a conversation with the girl who was a year younger than himself, he glanced outside the window and noticed a bright red car parked outside. He couldn't take his eyes off of it. Ryo shuffled through his memories.

It was a red sports car.

"That's a really cool car, isn't it? It looks expensive. Do you think it belongs to a doctor?" Chigusa said quietly. It appeared as if she was confused and desperately trying to find something to talk about.

Ryo had seen that car before. He had seen it when he met her in Ikebukuro. It wasn't the type of car one saw on the street all that often. That red Maserati was Pi's beloved car.

Shino's also here! Everything suddenly came together. Ryo ground his teeth in frustration. According to Reiko Saeki, Chigusa was under CC Corp's care, even though she herself didn't know it. In other words, Shino Nanao was hospitalized in a facility linked together with CC Corp because she went into a coma while playing *The World*. Suddenly, Ryo felt like a bolt of electricity had crashed through his head.

"Ms. Kusaka," a young doctor appeared as he called out her name. "You forgot this."

The doctor handed a file over to Chigusa. It probably contained the results to her exam. Chigusa gasped in embarrassment as she took the file.

The young doctor finally noticed Ryo. "Is he your friend?" the doctor asked.

Chigusa nodded as she gave a vague answer. It was hard trying to explain Ryo and Chigusa's relationship to others. They had seen into the depths of each other's souls when they were in Avatar Space and understood each other like none other. At the same time, this was the first time they had ever met in real life. Since they were in different grades, there was an added sense of distance between them.

Ryo looked at the young doctor and spaced out as a part of his soul seemed to leave his body. The doctor's name tag had KUROGAI written on it. He didn't recognize the name.

"Have I met you before...?" Kurogai asked in an attempt to find out more about Ryo.

"I visit this hospital often. We might have passed each other in the hall," Ryo answered vaguely.

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No, that didn't seem quite right. A strange feeling flooded Ryo's mind. They had met somewhere. It had happened so long ago that the memories had been locked away.

"Ngh!" Ryo suddenly jolted straight up as if he had been hit by lightning. The next moment, Ryo quickly hurried off, as if running for his life.

"Hey, kid!"

Ryo continued to run, leaving behind Dr. Kurogai as he called out after him and a dumbfounded Chigusa. He raced through the hospital halls. He ran, ignoring the nurses' orders for him to stop as he flew by them. He went through a breezeway and into an unfamiliar part of the hospital. He never once lost his bearings. It was as if he had been to this hospital wing before.

He climbed up the stairs and opened the emergency door into a windowless hallway. But now there was a wall blocking him. Two strong guards held Ryo down. It wasn't like he was in *The World* where he could have Haseo mow down his enemies. The guards held Ryo pinned to the ground so fiercely it felt like his bones were about to break.

"Let go! Let go of me!" Ryo screamed.

He had to run. He *needed* to run. He needed to run before the thin thread of memory finally lifted from the mud and broke. He was like the hero Theseus following his ball of yarn through the labyrinth where the bull-headed Minotaur dwelled.

Dr. Kurogai, who had been chasing after him, had finally caught up. Chigusa was gasping for breath behind him.

It was as if Ryo had gone crazy, the way he continued to scream out. The guards and Dr. Kurogai appeared to be arguing about something. Chigusa was unable to do anything, so she merely stood there in shock.

"What's all this ruckus about?" a woman's voice demanded sharply.

When the guards realized who the owner of the voice was, they showed her the respect due to a superior. The muscles in their arms loosened slightly as they continued to hold down the invader they had worked so hard to catch. Ryo was still pinned to the ground as he forced his head up.

"Misaki...?" the woman gasped in surprise when she saw the intruder's face.

"Ms. Saeki!" Chigusa croaked.

Reiko glanced over at Chigusa and Dr. Kurogai before looking back at Ryo and letting her shoulders slump.



TWO

Takumi Hino was lying on a bed in a hospital room that lacked windows. Only a single sheet covered the young man. The way the medical equipment surrounded him gave the impression that he was a research specimen rather than a patient. This was Yata's player. He had prioritized researching out the AIDA phenomenon

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in *The World* above all else only to be transformed into a piece of parchment paper.

Ryo couldn't contain his surprise when he was told the player was only seventeen-years old. He was indignant that someone his own age had looked down on him so disdainfully. At the same time, he admired the guy for achieving status that was on another plane altogether from his own as a high school student. Likewise, he couldn't help but feel horribly sad for Takumi. The way Yata had become a Lost One was like a premonition of Ryo's own future. One wrong step and he could have ended up like this. This could even be his fate in the not-too-distant future.

Ryo listened to Reiko's outline on Takumi Hino's life.

"Seven years ago during the Morganna Incident, he helped the hero Kite as the sage, Wiseman." Wiseman had specialized in gathering information and had mastered *The World* inside and out.

Ryo reflected back on the Banshouya Files.

IN TRYING TO UNCOVER THE MYSTERIES OF "THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT," KITE CONTACTED WISEMAN. WISEMAN WAS A WEALTH OF INFORMATION. WITH WISEMAN'S HELP, KITE LEARNED ABOUT "THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT" AND THE EIGHT CURSED WAVES. KITE THEN WENT TO VISIT AN UNSTABLE SERVER CALLED THE NET SLUM. IT WAS A PLACE

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THAT WAS PART OF THE WORLD AND YET NOT PART OF THE WORLD. THERE, HACKERS, UNSTABLE AI CHARACTERS CALLED ROGUE AIS, AND JUNK DATA MIXED AND GATHERED.

Kite had recognized Wiseman's knowledge and let him take the stage as strategist. It was his job to make battle plans against the Eight Phases of Morganna.

WISEMAN, WHO HAD RESEARCHED THE CURSED WAVES WRITTEN IN 'THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT,' TOLD KITE THAT IN ORDER TO KEEP THE VIRUS INFECTION FROM SPREADING, IT WAS NECESSARY TO DESTROY THE REMAINING FIVE BODIES OF THE EIGHT PHASES, AS WELL AS CUBLA.

"WISEMAN'S OPINION WAS OF GREAT INTEREST TO PROJECT G.U. THAT IS, THEY WERE INTERESTED IN THE IDEA OF LINKS BETWEEN THE BRACELET, CUBLA, AURA, AND THE EIGHT PHASES OF MORGANNA. WE COULD NOT REACH A CONCLUSION BECAUSE THE HINTS IN "THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT" WERE SO OBSCURE. WISEMAN'S PROGRESS WAS FAR AHEAD OF THAT OF G.U.'S.

The details behind the Morganna Incident aside, Wiseman's actions had gained the approval of Project G.U.'s original leader, Jun Banshouya,

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despite the fact that he was just a mere player. CC Corp had continued to watch over him with fascination. Through a series of twists and turns, Takumi Hino had eventually inherited the leader position for G.U.

"But he was just a ten-year-old kid." Ryo's surprise and doubt were to be expected. Since Takumi was the same age as Ryo, that would have made him an elementary school student seven years ago.

"He was precocious." Reiko resumed her synopsis of Takumi's accomplishments. "After the incident was over, he continued to work as an information specialist throughout *The World's* golden age. He spent more time researching *The World* than any other while skipping grades right and left in the real world. He had already graduated from college two years before *The World R:2* was released and was considered a top-notch engineer."

He had earned a degree and was a successful investor while he was still in his teens. He had raised the funds to buy a large chunk of CC Corp's stock. Because he owned an impressive portion of their stock, he was able to jump straight to his dream job working for the system as the leader of Project G.U.

Ryo was at a loss for words. It felt as though Takumi was speeding through his life several times faster than any normal person.

"But Misaki, Kusaka, he is still a teenager, just like you two," Reiko said and lifted up the blanket around Takumi's legs. There was a scar left behind by surgery on one of his legs.

"He hurt his leg...?"

"Right." Takumi rarely talked about his private life, but he could become quite talkative whenever the conversation turned

to soccer. Takumi had belonged to a local soccer team that was headed straight for the pros until he injured his leg. Because of that injury, he had been forced to give up on ever becoming a professional player.

"Either way, I doubt I could have become a professional player." Takumi claimed his injury was for the better since it awoke him to reality before he got too emotionally involved. Knowing Takumi, he hadn't said that just to hide his frustration over having to give it up.

Takumi liked premier leagues in particular and was a big fan of Manchester United. He owned the entire top floor to a high-rise apartment complex. His bedroom was as lifeless as a model room. The only thing in it that belied his age were a few soccer balls that had been signed by some famous soccer players.

"The moment I started collecting other player's autographs, soccer quit being something to devote my life to and turned into something I casually watch on TV." Those balls served as a headstone for the part of him that had spent life chasing after a ball. Takumi had adopted a rather mature philosophical view of life.

Takumi's injury was the only thing keeping him a fellow teenager in Ryo's eyes. If he hadn't known about that injury, Ryo probably would have written Takumi Hino off as a prodigy. He would have viewed him as something completely foreign.

Yata has suffered loss. An Epitaph User's power was a reflection of the loss felt in their hearts. Haseo had lost Shino. Atoli had lost herself. Endrance had lost Mia. Sakubo had lost his big sister. And Yata had lost....

"He was in love with Aura," a young man said as he entered the hospital room.

The man appeared to be in his early twenties. He looked rough in his jeans and a polo shirt. The way he carried a large duffle bag gave the appearance that he had been traveling. In opposition to what he wore, a personnel tag dangled from the strap around his neck. It was just like the one Reiko was wearing.

He was a boy turned man, having lost all his hopes and dreams.

"Mr. Kasumi," Reiko called out his name.

Ryo quickly realized who it was. "You're Kuhn...?"

Ryo had gotten a glance of Kuhn in the real world when they went into Avatar Space during their fight at the Inverted City Megin Fi. Seven years ago he had become a Lost One with his PC, Sieg. Ryo mentally saw his childish face from seven years ago overlap with his more mature face.

"Hey, Haseo," Tomonari said when he glanced over at Ryo. "Your real name is Misaki, right? And you're...?"

"Chigusa Kusaka. I'm also Atoli."

"So you're both here. Did you set this up, Ms. Saeki?"

"It just kinda worked out this way," Reiko said indifferently and shrugged her shoulders. It looked like this wasn't supposed to be an offline get together.

Tomonari Kasumi had left his apartment in Kanazawa and was moving to Tokyo. He looked down at Takumi once more.

"The upper management that made that secret bargain with Ovan has disposed of Yata." Tomonari summarized the conversation he shared with Ovan after he had defected from Project G.U.

Ovan had infiltrated Yata's Serpent of Lore and forced him to awaken as an Epitaph User. That trickster had jolted Takumi's secret inner complex.

"She does not love me...."

Takumi Hino had loved *The World*. Takumi had wanted to learn about *The World* more than any other, but he had already given into despair. He had once fought alongside the hero Kite. He was just one of many helping hands, but he understood and accepted that as his place in the story.

But Yata had decided that he would stand in the center of the story in *The World R:2*. He resided in the center of *The World* thanks to the Serpent of Lore. He was bestowed an Epitaph-PC that held a Morganna Factor. But Yata was the only one unable to awaken.

"You've reached your limit." Ovan's words were the very shackles of Takumi's inferiority complex that bound him. Takumi Hino had failed to become a chosen one both as Wiseman and as Yata.

Takumi had created a certain longing clear back when he was still Wiseman. He may have just been an elementary school student, but he had fallen desperately in love with the newly born ultimate AI, Aura. That was the beginning of both his fortune and his undoing.

The love-struck sage cast a spell on himself. The only way to be one with the goddess was to fully understand her. So Takumi delved deep into *The World*.

"His love has gone unrequited for seven years." Tomonari sighed.

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That was Takumi Hino's story. He was Wiseman reborn as Yata. But then Yata fell into the hands of the dreaded trickster and was turned into a piece of parchment paper. Corbenik had transformed him into an item in *The World*. Yata had rejoiced wholeheartedly when that had happened.

"Mr. Hino..." Reiko sighed mournfully. Underneath Hino's mask as a successful prodigy was a deep feeling of inferiority. Even though Reiko had stood by his side, she had never noticed it.

"What Yata lost was..." Ryo whispered as he looked down. Takumi had sought Aura's love, but never received it. It was just like how Ryo had confessed his love for Shino only to be turned away. They were the same. But no matter how great an AI she may be, Aura wasn't human. Could Takumi's feelings for her truly be called love?

"I understand how he feels," Tomonari said as he looked down at Takumi.

Ryo silently nodded in agreement.

Love was a type of emotion. Love wasn't a real, physical object but an emotion felt in the heart. That was how Ryo was able to fall in love with the silver-haired Harvest Cleric. That's why just talking with her filled him with content. If he had felt any physical lust toward her, he would have come to realize that it was misplaced sentiment. Lust was a hindrance that could always be substituted with something else.

Ryo felt that Aura had probably been Takumi's first experience with love.

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"It's the first time I've sympathized with Yata," Tomonari laughed sadly.

Ryo knew why. Just like Takumi, Tomonari had been part of the Morganna Incident. Seven years ago, he had become a Lost One through his PC, Sieg. His now ex-girlfriend Mai Minase was the one who had saved him back then. Tomonari must have felt that his feelings toward her were akin to Takumi's feelings toward Aura.

"Mr. Kasumi," Reiko said in a stern voice, "you've caused a lot of problems since Kuhn was already infected by AIDA when you temporarily took over Project G.U."

This was business talk. Whether as a full-time employee or a part-timer, *The World* was their workplace.

"Uh...."

"You were appointed to a position of responsibility. To top it off, the members of upper management who made that secret deal with the illegal hacker, Ovan, are losing power. Rumors have it that several employees are going to get their pink slips."

"Yikes!" Tomonari exclaimed and rubbed the back of his head.

"I don't think 'yikes' covers it."

"I can't believe a drifter like me is going to make some of the almighty CC Corp employees get fired. I think they got the short end of the stick." Tomonari laughed gleefully.

"You seem rather nonchalant."

"If you want, I'll try looking depressed like I'm at a wake or something. Not that it's going to change anything."

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"Ugh."

"I just moved from the country to the big city and I'm all on my own. I don't have anything to lose. I won't run away. I don't know what I can do or if I'll be of any help, but I'm going to stay here until the very end. That guy Ovan has it coming," Tomonari said with determination plastered on his face.

"What are we going to do?" Ryo asked bluntly, desperately hoping someone had a plan.

The anti-AIDA team, Project G.U., was essentially shut down as a whole when the Serpent of Lore was taken away from them. But G.U. was a top-secret section that even most CC Corp employees didn't know about. Their loss didn't affect the online game's supervision and administration teams. *The World* was still running just as it had before. In Japan alone, several million players were left naked to the AIDA threat.

Even so, CC Corp was not about to shut down *The World*. After all, it was scientifically impossible to prove that the online game had anything to do with its players falling into comas. There was no need for camouflage if no one could prove there was a problem to begin with.

"Upper management is acting just like they did seven years ago," Tomonari said cynically.

"Still, I can't imagine what would happen if they closed down *The World's* servers," Ryo asserted.

"Yeah."

"It's like they're throwing dirt to cover up the only leads we have to solving the AIDA problem."

Project G.U.'s anti-AIDA provisions were held in *The World* for the most part. If AIDA were to leak outside of *The World*, CC Corp and all of humanity would truly be made powerless before the online virus, AIDA.

"*The World* could easily be the only place we can come to a mutual understanding with the AIDA virus as things stand now," Reiko said tensely. *The World* was the only place where human and AIDA—real intelligence and artificial intelligence born on the Net—could truly interact.

"It's like an Avatar Space for people and AIDA."

"It's a place where we can identify with each other."

In that case, they couldn't abandon *The World*. It was clear that they needed to have a good, long talk with Ovan. After all, Ovan and AIDA were one and the same.

"Uh, what about Sakubo and Endrance...?" Chigusa asked, wanting to know what had become of the other Epitaph Users.

Back in the Lost Ground of the World of Sin, Ran Hati, Ryo had gotten a glimpse of Sakubo in the real world. Although he couldn't say for certain, he believed that Bo, or Iori Nakanishi in the real world, suffered from multiple personality disorder. His second personality was of his dead sister, Saku. Apparently only his Saku personality had awoken as an Epitaph User for The Machinator.

"Iori Nakanishi, Sakubo's player and Epitaph User for the Fifth Phase, The Machinator, Gorre, is currently under CC Corp's supervision. I wish we could obtain custody of him, but

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it's not easy since he's still a minor under parental supervision," Reiko answered.

It was believed that Iori's parents had psychologically damaged him to the point that he developed a dissociative disorder. Since Ryo had seen glimpses of Iori's life, he felt that it would be best to get the kid away from his parents as quickly as possible, even if it was their family's problem. But according to CC Corp's investigations, there was no sign of any life-threatening abuse.

"At any rate, we've got Iori Nakanishi under our supervision for now. Naturally, I don't consider him a force in our upcoming battles against AIDA. As for Endrance...."

"How's that recluse doing?" Ryo asked Reiko.

"The same as always, I guess."

"Isn't Kaoru Ichinose a legal adult?" Tomonari broke in.

Reiko nodded. "He's twenty.... I know! Misaki, why don't you go recruit him?"

"Huh?"

"Ask him to hole up in CC Corp if he wants to be a recluse somewhere. There's a fair number of people in my company who like to closet themselves up in the company building. The main building is sparkly clean with room service. Tell him he'd be treated like a guest at a hotel."

"Why me?"

"Because you're *friends*."

Reiko's answer made Ryo's head spin. The ever smart and sensible Reiko Saeki probably lumped Kaoru and Ryo into the same category of reclusive online game junkies.

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"Let's restart Project G.U.," Tomonari suggested, his voice filled with determination. He held his hand out for everyone to grab hold of. "We'll fight Ovan. That man is the mastermind who knows everything."

Ovan was the man behind the curtain with the AIDA incident.

"Just discerning that much has made our last contact with him meaningful." Reiko nodded.

"Right."

"We didn't get a thrashing for nothing. We won't let it end that way," Ryo said to Chigusa. Ryo shook Tomonari's outstretched hand, just as he had done once in *The World*.

"Mr. Hino will be all right. He isn't dead yet," Reiko said.

"Huh...?"

"He doesn't smell of death."

Cells gave off a particular scent when they died. Certain breeds of dog could be trained to identify cancer in its early stages. A perfume specialist with a heightened sense of smell could tell when a complete stranger was going to die just by sniffing them when passing by. Since Reiko's sense of smell had become sensitive due to her Morganna Factor, she could tell by Takumi's smell that his body was still healthy.



THREE

Masato Indou had worked at various companies as a system engineer, but he had spent the past few years working as an investigator for the Network Administration Bureau (NAB).

NAB was an international network investigation organization. Although most people hadn't heard of it, the organization was an outer branch of the United Nations. Bluntly put, their job was to collect data on the Internet, dispose of unnecessary data and organize any useful data for future prosperity. It was essentially the United Nations' secret service. But whereas spies normally swore loyalty to their country, there was no country for which the NAB investigators were to swear loyalty.

There were some investigators who joked that they were "volunteer spies." In all actuality, it was harder to get into NAB than equivalent companies that were civilian-run. Not to mention it didn't pay well considering the risk involved. The spy trade was so unpopular and in such desperate need for workers that they had gone as far as to release want ads.

NAB's ideology was "to make the network a safe place." Humankind had been struck by two network crises, one in 2005 and the other in 2010. The United Nations was completely powerless before those digital hazards. To top it off, the large corporations and global superpowers kept getting in the way of a healthy network revival. The network needed to be supervised for everlasting worldwide peace, not just for a handful of countries. In order to resist powerhouses like the United States of

America and the almost equally-economically powerful China, NAB had to protect the people's rights on an international scale.

While they naturally investigated the affairs of various countries, they also investigated things such as politics, economy, military, drugs and the latest research conducted by industries and universities. But even so, the life as a spy was not nearly as exciting as movies and novels portrayed it to be.

It was a fairly boring job where a lot of time was spent on clipping articles out of newspapers. The majority of the information spies gathered had already been released to the public. They didn't have to hack into computers and steal classified information. They were able to obtain and analyze viable material by gathering information released on the news or in press releases. The secret service mostly looked at a person's ability to analyze material when looking to hire them. Only a handful of countries and their secret services were able to compete with NAB size-wise and ability-wise when it came to the Internet.

Masato Indou worked from home. He liked how NAB allowed their investigators to conduct research in their own unique ways.

Masato's field of research was in network communities and online games. He wasn't reading entertainment game magazines to check out the latest reviews. There were several games that claimed to have millions of players in this particular category. As such, they functioned as gigantic economic powerhouses.

There were multimillionaires created from the realization of goods into cash that some of the titles had adopted. Even though games

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used a fictitious monetary system, real money trade (RMT) was used to help economically support underground communities. Naturally, the game companies recommended against RMT altogether. RMT helped run the mafia and was often used in money laundering.

At the end of 2015, Masato Indou and his PC, Ovan, had been chosen to investigate the largest online game in the world. It was the upgraded version of *The World*, making it *The World R:2*. The company that had released the game, CC Corp, was a giant in the online gaming industry. There was also an endless supply of bad rumors surrounding the international corporation. Anyone who worked closely with NAB had heard rumors about how CC Corp had been the cause of the Second Network Crisis.

Masato had originally logged in *The World* as a normal player. But before long he grew bored of the information typical players shared and began using various cheats and illegal hacks. It was important for a spy to not stand out. He had broken that iron-clad rule, but *The World* was one of those online games that secretly accepted illegal behavior. Just as there was an endless supply of criminals in the real world, *The World* had traditionally been filled with a large number of cheaters and hackers. There were illegal servers and a player-made Root Town not listed in the game manual. Even though illegal behavior was not encouraged, it was constantly being conducted. Ovan simply melted in with the group of illegal players in *The World*.

That was when Masato first met Yata, or Takumi Hino, *The World's* greatest information specialist.



Σ HIDDEN FORBIDDEN EXHIBITION, BALBOL MUSEUM

The archives were filled with wooden racks that contained a wide variety of items. They held paintings, sculptures, pottery, artifacts, manuscripts, and even movie reels. They were all clumped together, completely unclassified. Dust did not build up over time in these archives. Everything was preserved here without fear of the wood and paper rotting, the pottery breaking, or the color pigmentation deteriorating. All of the art was composed of data, but that did not make the art fake. The materials in Balbol Museum no longer existed in the real world. In fact, some of it had never existed there to begin with. It had value simply because it existed in *The World's* network.

Off in the corner of the archives was a birdcage hanging on a pole that resembled a hat rack. The cage door was wide open with a small, monkey-like prosimian inside. The animal appeared to be bored, for it gave a very human-like yawn.

Ovan was reading over some text he had picked up in the archive. It was an ordinary-looking text file. Here text files took on the form of books.

"The creator of the file is Harald Hoerwick," Ovan said, identifying the writer out of habit as he began looking over the file.

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Attached to Ovan's left shoulder was a black arm that resembled parasitic caterpillar fungus—the Tri-Edge AIDA. It looked interested in the text as it took a peak for itself.

The two were dangerous friends.

Harald Hoerwick was *The World's* original game creator. The file was dated 2007, which was the same year the *R:1* version had been released. The note must have been written toward the end of *The World's* production. Harald's health had been deteriorating at that time and then he vanished without a trace before the game's public release. Although a body was never found, Masato doubted that a corpse remained.

There was very little data concerning Harald from when he was busy making *The World*. Harald's theories as an AI engineer had received great acclaim and were available online to anyone willing to conduct a minor search for them. However, it wouldn't be an over-exaggeration to say that there weren't any interviews of him regarding game production. Some letters he had exchanged with fellow staff members were still available, but everything Harald wrote was completely work-related. It was easy to tell that he had not opened his heart to the staff at CC Corp. It wasn't surprising since he had just planted a black box in *The World* behind CC Corp's back. He had done so after creating the fundamental workings behind the game all on his own.

"He created the Morganna System to sample human thought in the highly popular MMORPG in the hopes of creating the ultimate AI."

The Banshouya Files went into great detail about how Harald had designed the online game and how things had progressed with CC Corp. Harald had wanted to prove his undying love for the late Emma Wielant. He had wanted to create the ultimate AI, Aura, who would inherit his knowledge and skills along with Emma's sense of poetry and beauty.

"Everything he did was for Emma."

Harald had been completely absorbed in his pure love for Emma.

Emma Wielant was born in western Germany on the Rhine riverside. Emma's parents died when she was still young. She left her uncle, who was her guardian, and began attending school on her path to independence. When she was twenty she moved to southern France for health reasons. While there, she underwent a life-changing spiritual experience.

"A spiritual experience, huh?" Ovan asked sourly.

The file didn't give any details, just that the spiritual experience had made Emma convert to Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy.

The word *Anthroposophy* was originally a combination of the Greek words for *human* and *wisdom*. Going by his quick investigation, it wasn't a school of thought that could be lumped into just one category.

The key word was *awareness*. While that included physical objects that could be perceived through the five senses, it also stepped into the bounds of people's perception of the supernatural and spiritual. It acknowledged a higher state of being. Anthroposophy linked humans with space. It covered the micro and the macro. It

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could be called a spiritual science as it tied science, art and religion together. Since it offered lessons on how to develop super sensory perception, it had characteristics of mysticism as well.

At any rate, it would not mix well together with materialism. There was no room for a realist like Yata who held experimentation and observation above all else.

"No wonder she dumped him." Ovan snickered, unable to hold back a wry smile. Aura's mother probably hated humans like Yata with a passion.

Anthroposophy had people obey their perception of things and there was no limit to one's perceptions. The sixth sense could perceive an object in its "true form" as that sense surpassed the other five. It was how humans could approach the spirit world—how they approached God.

It was vital to understand that the Anthroposophy that Steiner advocated wasn't some toy cult for those with intellectual curiosity. It was a movement that sung of revolutionizing the human existence through the sublimation of academia, art and social warfare.

Emma attended various seminars and viewed Steiner's Anthroposophy as academia. She tried to develop the "art" of her sixth sense. That was what breathed life into her true, inner self. Emma began releasing her writings on the Net. "The Epitaph of Twilight" was supposed to be an epic poem that portrayed her feelings about the spiritual world, humans and the universe.

And then destiny drew them together. Emma met Harald Hoerwick at one of his seminars where he was discussing AI development through Anthroposophy.

"It's hard evidence that Emma Wielant's epic poem, 'The Epitaph of Twilight,' is absolutely vital if one is to truly understand *The World*."

The incomplete poem, "The Epitaph of Twilight," was secretly featured on Emma Wielant's personal website. The poem was never completed, for Emma passed away in 2004. Supposedly she died in an unfortunate accident. Shortly after her poem was put online, it was set up so that no one could directly save it from her browser or copy-and-paste it into another document file. Emma wasn't a professional writer, so it was never published in a book format. During the First Network Crisis a year after she died, the original German version of the story was lost.

"I imagine no one cared that one of a sickeningly large number of amateur fantasy stories disappeared off the Net."

Emma's poem didn't hit the limelight until several years after her death, when *The World's* beta version, *Fragment*, was released. The poem served as the basis for the game world's storyline. Even though that was considered common knowledge, CC Corp never made a public announcement regarding their connection with "The Epitaph of Twilight." CC Corp didn't know the secret shared between Harald and Emma. In the blink of an eye, maniac fans fervently began collecting and recompiling the story fragments that had dissipated across the Internet.

According to Masato's research, Emma Wielant's "The Epitaph of Twilight" could have been categorized as high fantasy or epic fantasy. It was a story about the age of spirits coming to an end.

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The world of shadowless spirits was on the verge of destruction because of the calamity brought on by the cursed Waves. The King of Lios, Apeiron, and the Queen of Dakk, Helba, formed a truce and fought against the Waves together. The spirit world had a legend that "three shadowed ones will begin a quest for the Twilight Dragon." In the end, a shadowed human named Saya traveled to the trembling island at the ends of the earth.

She turns her back to the wheat field.

*As she turns her back to the wheat field ravaged by the Waves,
the girl with a shadow's whisper can be heard:*

"Without a doubt, I shall return."

But the girl didn't know

The truth awaiting her at journey's end.

Her land shall be lost for all eternity.

These Fragments of "The Epitaph" were still around. Volunteers arranged the fragments of the poem, which could be found with just a quick search on the Net. But since these fragments were pieces of text data, it was easy for people to edit, alter or fabricate parts of the story. One had to be careful reading what was online since it was difficult discerning whether the poem was genuine or not.

"Books have a mysterious magic about them."

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For some unfathomable reason, people never questioned books that were printed on paper or published on an online information site. It was easy for people to believe such works to be accurate, even though their authenticity was often as reliable as an anonymous post written on a message board. Anything human-made was bound to have errors in it. Hateful misunderstandings born from disinterest and laziness created false words that ran rampant.

It is unknown from whence the Waves came.

*Once the stars cross the heavens and the eastern sky is dark,
the air filled with sadness,
The Wave cometh from across the forest where those who doth age dwell.
Skeith races in the front line.
Carrying the Shadow of Death, he sweeps away all who oppose him.
Innis, the Mirage of Deceit,
Fools all with her false images as she aids the Wave.
As the Wave approaches Heaven, it breaks into droplets
that give rise to new Waves.
Such is the power of Magus.
The light of hope is lost wherever the Waves appear;
anxiety and resignation rule supreme.
Fidchell uses his powers to prophesize of the dark future to befall all.
Gorre plots for how the cursed Waves may surround and devour everything.
Macha placates others with her sweet traps.
There is no escape as the Waves rage on.*

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*Tarvos stands waiting for those who thought they had escaped,
Crushing them with indescribable cruelty.*

*The destructive ferocity
Left a void in the Waves' wake.*

*Corbenik doth come from the depths of the empty darkness.
Are the Waves but a prelude of what is to come?*

Masato believed that to be a true Fragment of "The Epitaph" and was confident that the translations were decent. After all, the version of this text made open to the public matched the text he had found in Balbol Museum. On the other hand, there were plenty of Fragments of "The Epitaph" that were generally believed to be accurate, but were filled with arbitrary mistranslations and alterations.

The most reliable source for Masato's research was the MMORPG *The World*, which had used "The Epitaph of Twilight" as the basis for its storyline. The reason being, Harald Hoerwick, the original game creator for *The World*, had interacted with Emma Wielant before her death.

*When one points their finger to the moon,
Oh ye fool,
Shall gaze upon the fingertip.*

If one only went by translations of the epic poem and its story, then there were no truly accurate versions available. Emma only wrote her story in German, but that version no longer existed.

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"It's like the New Testament."

An original copy no longer existed of the bestselling book in the world. All of the writings by the various apostles and disciples that composed The Bible had been lost, from the Synoptic Gospels written about Jesus's journeys to the prophetic Book of Revelations. As the Christian church began growing in the first century, all the various books were compiled and released as one book, the Holy Bible. The oldest documents that still remained were handwritten fragments of copies. There were distinct discrepancies in the copies, making it easy for anyone to hunt for "errors."

Most versions of the New Testament published these days were primarily based off the Greek translations made in the fourth century when the Roman Empire first allowed Christianity. The Greek translations and various fragments of hand-copied text were compared against each other, allowing the Church to come up with what they believed to be the closest thing possible to the original. Top theologians had worked together to create an incredible revision of the Bible.

It was the Gospel, but the original books no longer existed.

There has been a missing link for literally hundreds of years. "The Epitaph of Twilight" shared this problem with The Bible. The original manuscript no longer existed and the writer was dead. Since Emma had never been interviewed, it was impossible to tell if the research and translations of "The Epitaph of Twilight" were correct or not. The literary critics debated over the research surrounding "The Epitaph of Twilight" and even

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over whether it was worth researching. They were the ones who researched the various methods and accuracy thereof. The goal wasn't to clarify what was true and what was false. Still, there were those who argued that it should be clarified and unjustly claimed they knew the only true interpretation. Those who insisted that their way was the only right way were malicious. With that point in mind, the sites that featured "The Epitaph of Twilight," along with book releases and official sites that took money to view the collection were raping the writer's mind. Who but Emma Wielant could argue what the truth behind her spiritual world was in "The Epitaph of Twilight" since it was a projection of her own mind?

It was of the utmost importance that Masato keep that in mind. After all, he was a thief about to usurp the original creator. Ovan both respected and violated Emma Wielant's dignity.

"The Epitaph of Twilight" was a story about the world of spirits. The main character was a girl named Saya, who appeared in the story as the first person to ever have a shadow. She was a human with a shadow, making her an anomaly in her world. That was one of the fundamental characteristics that formed the framework for the story.

*It is impossible to alter the system.
The chance to do so is long since past.
Since we had precious little time left
we took the wrong path.*

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*Now we realize:
We should not try to alter the system,
But change as individuals.*

“The protagonist was an anomaly to begin with. As such, it was necessary for her to have a shadow.” The changes in the protagonist with a shadow had a direct influence on the flow of the story. Once she had a shadow, there was no longer a need to change the world (the system) as a whole and start anew. That was understandable since Emma wrote this from an Anthroposophist’s standpoint.

In Emma’s spiritual world, the way the individuals perceived things through their supersensory perception ordained the form of the object—the world. Since the human, Saya, was an anomaly, it was intrinsically impossible for her to fit in with the shadowless spirits. Nonetheless, Saya went on a journey to save the world.

But why would she do that for a world in which she didn’t belong? Since Emma was a devoted Anthroposophist, it was unlikely she did it for justice or friendship like one might see in a boy’s comic.

*The Waves doth approach Heaven, covering everything in sight.
With no means to defy the ubiquitous power,
The shadowless ones do naught but sigh:
“What hath caused the Waves?
If there was but one giant Wave, we could retaliate.”*

For Emma, it was done for the spiritual good.

Awareness in and of itself had no physical form. A subject with awareness did not necessarily equal a human, nor did an object necessarily equal a thing. Awareness was made of "actions," which were composed of processes and movement.

"It continues forever, without end." According to Steiner, *awareness was a path.*

"How wonderful." Ovan chuckled lightly. Since Steiner came up with such fascinating concepts, he was probably ostracized as a weirdo in his day and age, as had Jesus and Buddha. Masato loved the word "paths," which was what Anthroposophy was all about.

Across Dragonbein Range

The party meets a monkey with the power of words.

The monkey asks of them:

"I am always with you.

I am difficult for you to endure and hard to accept,

But we are inseparable.

What is my name?"

Once Yata had said in his days as a sage, "Twilight can be used to mean 'something is about to die.' 'The Epitaph of Twilight' was not written with the intent to be a story about endings, but a story about new beginnings."

It was an epic poem about the way the world was. It didn't matter whether or not Emma had the skill to write something that

grandiose. Emma died in an accident, but "The Epitaph of Twilight" had not died. This was where Harald Hoerwick stepped in.

*The shadowed one who hath embarked on a quest
To find the Twilight Dragon hath yet to return.*

The dark hearth rumbles;

Helba, Queen of Dakk, finally raises her army.

Apeiron, King of Lios, offers his support.

Both sides converge at the rainbow's end,

For together they shall fight the cursed Waves.

The Lake of Alba boils.

The Tree of Lios topples.

All their power turns into droplets at the temple in Arche Koeln.

The world without shadows doth return to nothingness.

Never shall the shadowed one who sought the Twilight Dragon return home.

"Harald, I want to speak with you. I want to speak with you back when you were creating Heaven and Earth—*The World*."

Masato scrolled down the note fragment. He wanted to hear a lecture, straight from Harald Hoerwick's mouth. He wanted to hear it back before the creator of *The World* had been apotheosized, when he was still a human with a shadow. He was a man who had felt unrequited love for the beautiful Emma only then to lose the love of his life. He was wretched and pathetic, yet still strong. No matter how badly he was beaten, he continued to walk down his path of awareness.

Masato wanted to take a peak at the emptiness of his heart as it squirmed.

Harald understood Emma. He was her friend and a witness to her art. He lived up to his role.

"It was vital that Aura become sentient."

Aura had to grow into a combination of her parents' beauty and spiritual goodness. Minus the fact that she lacked a body, she was the same as a human. In fact, she perceived things through superior senses, making her a higher state of being—she was the ultimate AI in her own world. She was the goddess on the other side of the path of awareness for which they had always longed.

Masato needed to know everything. Otherwise it would be impossible for Ovan to usurp her and become god of *The World*.

"*The World* shall be made anew by my hands," he declared.

Masato had to unravel the mystery behind Harald Hoerwick's story, which was composed of Emma's thoughts of clairvoyance and of a higher existence. These thoughts could be found in the "The Epitaph of Twilight."

"If we were fellow Epitaph Users, we could share our memories in Avatar Space and talk through that."

But the only way Masato was ever going to talk to someone who had already passed away was to join him on the other side. The PC, Ovan, carried two powers through Aura and AIDA, allowing him to brighten the path of awareness to the other side with the embodiment of the light of self-awareness. The

fragments of the creator that Masato had been searching for seemed to have collected most strongly here, in Balbol Museum. The data in these archives was part of the other side of the game. They were only supposed to have been viewable to the game creator.

“Harald, you were both an AI engineer and an Anthroposophist.”

It seemed only natural for a man developing an artificial intelligence to delve into Anthroposophy since it explored human wisdom. Harald was from eastern Germany and was raised in a non-religious family as was common for those living in a communist country. Supposedly he devoted himself solely to contemporary philosophies when he was a college student. He was strongly influenced by Freud and Jung, since they served as the foundation for his education. They made a general definition of the subconscious mind and promoted self-analysis. They talked about the negative end of a person's mind—the awareness of their own shadows. Harald had one hand in ideology and the other in engineering. Since AI engineering was a rather new field, there weren't any degrees available.

Masato's eyes stopped on one of the lines in Harald's note.

“Oh...?”

Ovan's tinted glasses glistened. He straightened his glasses, which had fallen askew. The simple act was an impressive display, something one might expect from an Epitaph User since his mind was linked to his PC.

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What do you see?

What do you hear?

What do you smell?

What do you taste?

What do you touch?

What do you know?

Where did the path of knowledge paved by his predecessors take Harald Hoerwick in his final years?

Why do you think?

Because I exist.

That meant that a person's senses and sensory perception only existed because the person was self-aware.

"*A physical body is a hindrance,*" stated a voice coming from the note fragment. Harald had created the ultimate AI, which had supersensory perception that allowed it to gain awareness of a higher level—it was a goddess.

"There is only the mind."

That was the end result of Harald's intellectual adventures.

As Ovan read through the note, a look of satisfaction grew on the face of the man wearing tinted glasses. Perhaps he had finally come to accept things. He acknowledged what the Heavenly Path was. He acknowledged the truth.

Recognition did not indicate the measurement of "what was

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to be accomplished," "what had been accomplished," and "what had been created." It was the exercise of a kinetic chain pulling on the threads of karma.

"Humans like to make the simplest of things oh-so-difficult, don't they?"

He just had to keep walking. Unable to contain his excitement, Ovan began talking to the Tri-Edge AIDA on his left shoulder. The black hand with three fingers tilted itself to one side as if to indicate that it was thinking.

"Wouldn't you say humans are a rather handicapped species?" Masato smiled wryly before returning to Harald's note. He had to carve everything Harald said into his memory.

"That is why I shall name her Aura.

This child would have been impossible without you.

The child Aura glows with light.

I shall entrust her with our will.

I shall entrust her with our future.

She is our...."



CHAPTER TWO: DONUTS AND COFFEE CUPS

ONE

The World R:2 was released to the public. Players who had just logged in were gathering around Root Towns and calling out to friends to form parties. Guild mates were exchanging information about maintenance and modification patches, word combinations for good hunting grounds, and rumors on the boards. Then they would travel to the lands of adventure through a Chaos Gate. People who had never met in real life were sharing life-and-death experiences together on the Net.

What did the players do?

There were countless numbers of outcomes waiting for them. And then the players would do something else. Actions and results—the thread of cause and effect rotated. The way it rotated was influenced by karma. The thread of karma entangled in upon itself, creating a large net that stretched into infinity. If that was

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how the world worked, and the 12-million people playing *The World* had supersensory perception that let them see spirits, then they were behaving as creatures from a higher plane of existence. The communication in this community was exactly what the great game creator had hoped for when making this gigantic MMORPG.

The autonomy of *The World* had emotion.

Δ ROOT TOWN: THE ETERNAL CITY OF MAC ANU

It was twilight in Mac Anu. A blue-haired Lord Partizan and a girl Harvest Cleric stood by the bottom of a bridge that crossed one of the large canals.

"Supposedly the number of accounts in *The World* is plummeting," Kuhn said to Atoli in a private chat.

Kuhn and Atoli were alone together. Since the two had met in the real world, they perceived each other in a different light. They weren't the only ones in the game like that. Now they couldn't pretend the person they were talking with didn't exist in real life, even when chatting in the game world.

"I imagine Moon Tree's compulsory dissolution played a big role in that, didn't it?" Atoli asked.

"Because it was unprecedented. The system has never made a guild disband before. The fact that it was Moon Tree made it all the worse."

After the AIDA server incident in Moon Tree's @HOME, CC Corp announced that Moon Tree's leaders had caused

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problems by illegally tampering with their @HOME area data and shut them down. They had completely ignored the psychological damage done to the players through the tragic genocide that took place there. This was how upper management at CC Corp always handled things. It was medically impossible to prove that the players fell into comas because of the game, so no one could confirm or deny the validity of any such irresponsible official statements.

"CC Corp is hiding the truth about Lost Ones just like they did seven years ago." Kuhn ground his teeth in frustration, for he had been a Lost One at one point in time.

"Denying what CC Corp says to be true would make you look insane."

"Neither the public nor the mass media is going to fight public opinion and deny what sounds like common sense. Anyone who did would get attacked for it."

Even the hero Kite, who had solved the problems of seven years ago and saved the Lost Ones, had been unable to alter public opinion and punish the evil corporation known as CC Corp.

"No one wants to be told they're wrong.... Everyone wants to think that they're in the right."

"Yeah."

"In the end, Sakaki.... Sakaki's player was held responsible for what happened and his account was suspended."

"Sakaki's player was partially responsible. At least, he was responsible for what happened to you, but...."

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Sakaki's player was responsible as an individual for the way he hurt Chigusa's heart. But what about the AIDA phenomenon?

"He was a scapegoat."

"It truly is cruel of anyone to question whether his player in *The World* had broken the End User License Agreement. CC Corp is the one letting that dangerous intelligent virus, AIDA, run amok," Tomonari said in a quiet voice. This concerned him, too.

"Hmm...?"

"Just as they replaced Yata, I might find myself as another scapegoat. The upper management is going nuts trying to dump the blame on someone over the whole AIDA problem. As far as actually resolving the problem is concerned, they've completely thrown in the towel."

"No way."

"So I've gotta take care of things," Tomonari said and pulled out Magus. Even if G.U. was shut down, he was still the Epitaph User for the Third Phase, The Propagation.

"You mean *we* have to take care of things," the Harvest Cleric smiled while embracing Innis.

A group of PCs passed by on their way to the Chaos Gate. Only fellow Epitaph Users could see Avatars. Epitaph Users existed on a plane higher than that of normal PCs.

"Atoli...."

"I was saved." During the incident at Moon Tree's @HOME, Haseo had stopped the AIDA-infected Innis's rampage. They had sympathized with one another in Avatar Space. Chigusa

Kusaka and Ryo Misaki had gained an understanding of each other and peacefully reconciled their problems. Hand-in-hand they had solved one of the problems weighing down their hearts.

"By Haseo, right?"

"Right, but you saved me, too."

"I did?" He tilted his head in surprise over the unexpected response.

"I didn't do anything. I had already been infected by AIDA back then," Kuhn said guiltily as he scratched his cheek.

"But doesn't AIDA strengthen a person's emotions? If you look at it from a different angle, it means that you can't lie anymore."

According to Yata, players who had been infected by AIDA "were released from the bounds of rational thought." That meant the player could no longer hide feelings they had kept bottled up.

During that incident Kuhn had said, "Trust me."

Since Sakaki was toying with Atoli, Kuhn had stabbed him in the back with Magus. The shining light of his Avatar had cut the bulbous tumor called "Sakaki" out of her heart. He had broken the warped story that had congealed into that form.

"That's why I trust you, Kuhn," Atoli told her friend. There was no lie in those words as they came straight from the heart.

"Thank you."

Those simple words saved Kuhn. The young man who had dreamt of being a hero had been infected with the fever called "inflated ego" in the form of Kuhn. He had failed at his dream, but now he had to get back up again. He would truly fail if he let

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himself fall behind.

Δ SNEERING FAILING EMPIRE

Kestrel was the largest guild in *The World R:2* with over 5,000 guild members. The giant guild had achieved a rank high enough that it had earned its own area. Their @HOME was composed of graphics made just for them.

Some of Kestrel's small fry went to "greet" an unwanted guest, but screamed out when they realized it was the PKK, the Terror of Death.

"It's you!"

"I want to see the beast man," Haseo said sharply as if cutting through the dry air. The voice of the Adept Rogue in black echoed throughout the oriental-style shrine carved from the desolate stone walls. Kestrel flew into a flurry, like a beehive that had just gotten shaken up. This @HOME was like a field. Unlike a normal @HOME that was located in a Root Town, this place could be transformed into a battlefield that allowed PKing.

"Bring me Gabi," Haseo yelled out for the Guild Master.

Although Kestrel was infamous as a PK guild, none of the players here had the guts to fight Haseo—they glared at him from a distance.

"Oh, you're here! ^3^" Haseo was greeted with an annoying emoticon.

"I'm here," Ryo said as he forced Haseo to turn around. A

giant beast PC with a lion's face and reddish brown skin had been standing in his blind spot.

"So, who are you?"

"I'm Haseo, your 'little brother.'"

Although this guy was as slippery as they came, he no longer annoyed Ryo with every little thing he did anymore. Gabi had once referred to Haseo as his little brother. Haseo was like a brother to Ovan, and Gabi had "sworn an oath of brotherhood" with Ovan, therefore Haseo was also Gabi's brother.

"Uh-huh," Gabi responded calmly. Although his intonation was rough, it was like a cultivated Kabuki actor's voice, making it impossible to discern what the player was really thinking.

Haseo couldn't picture Gabi in the real world. This giant, red beast was just too strong for that with over five thousand members in his guild. In a way, all of the players who feared Kestrel were also influenced by Gabi and ruled by him. Gabi's influence was on a scale that reached out to literally thousands of players. Gabi was a man of influence in *The World*.

"How can I become like you? How do you bind other's hearts?" Ryo asked, jumping straight to the point. He wanted to know the secret behind Gabi's charisma. The way he asked the unexpected question with no regard to the other's concerns was in imitation of Ovan.

"Make them love you. ^_3^," Gabi said arrogantly, sticking his chest out proudly like a childish captain from some comic book.

"That goes without saying," Ryo agreed. That was the one

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thing Haseo lacked the most.

“Huh?”

“Love, eh?”

Ovan had indicated that Ryo’s feelings toward Shino as he tried to save her were of hate. Naturally, he had disagreed. Just thinking about Shino made him feel content. It had taken a strong heart and initiative for him to confess his love for her. Until that day, such a confession would have been impossible for Ryo Misaki. There was no way his precious feelings that shone bright could be hate.

Ryo reflected on this.

“If both happiness and sadness are part of love....” Haseo tried to come up with a profound solution in imitation of Ovan. Feelings were the vectors of love. Feelings started with the individual—the self, and love was the root of all feelings. Haseo had fallen in love with Shino, who had made him feel whole, only then to be rejected by her as the opposite gender.

“I might have hated her.”

“Sounds like love. ^3^” Gabi nodded emphatically.

“You mean to say I should have other people’s vectors of emotion point at me, whether it be happiness, sadness, hate, or any other type of emotion. Bluntly put, I should stand out.”

Going by that logic, the players in the giant faction that composed Kestrel showed their love to others through the fear they induced from PKs. Although it sounded strange, Haseo had shown his love for the PKers through invoking fear as a PKK. He had tried to gain clues on how to save Shino by PKKing others—it was the

story of how he fought to save Shino.

It was a ripple. The love Gabi talked about was like a giant wave. People had no choice but to obey the love. If they tried to fight the wave, they would be destroyed as it devoured them. Everyone had to go with the wave. They had to do their best to ride it.

Everyone looked up to this red lion. His wave was huge. In a way, this made Gabi king of *The World*. As long as he was playing in this Net game, none of the other players could hurt him for he was the law and the public opinion. Even if he was outrageous, he was the king. He was loved above all.

"Have you seen Ovan recently? Haseo changed his line of questioning.

"Not really," Gabi said. He looked somewhat cute as he shook his head.

"You're old friends.... Weren't you supposed to be like brothers? Wasn't that your relationship with Ovan?"

"Ovan! What a great guy!" Gabi's reaction showed he had missed the point of the question. It was about time Ryo gave up all hope on obtaining any information on Ovan's whereabouts.

Δ ROOT TOWN: THE ETERNAL CITY OF MAC ANU

Haseo put Kestrel's @HOME behind him and headed toward the fountain in the Root Town. It was late at night when the server was supposed to be at its busiest, but it looked like there were hardly any PCs scattered across Mac Anu's twilight landscape. It still hadn't

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risen to the surface yet, but this went to show that the number of people closing their accounts with *The World* was on the rise. Was the player's distrust in the system born from the way they forced Moon Tree to shut down? Was that their only reason for quitting the game?

"Rats always abandon a sinking ship."

There might be some unexplainable powers at work. Ryo was suddenly filled with a vague sense of insecurity. Was *The World* going to collapse before long? It seemed like a delusion the way a single man named Ovan could bring about the end of the world. In his lust to become a god, he had crushed the other Epitaph Users and was digesting the inner workings of the game world even now.

He wants to surpass humanity, huh?

Becoming a god was obviously a means to an end. The way he hid where he was going and where he came from was the source of Ovan's magic, which he used to his advantage. Until Ryo solved the riddle surrounding the Epitaph User for the Eighth Phase, The Rebirth, Ovan would probably continue to bend *The World* to his will like some powerful trickster. The only clues Ryo had were the Tri-Edge AIDA on Ovan's left shoulder and Shino's coma, which had been caused by Tri-Edge.

I have to reach Ovan's heart.

Ryo needed Avatar Space. He had to break through that trickster's maze of knowledge to step deep into the place where they could share their memories. Only then could he truly converse with Ovan's player.

There was a way. The only problem was that Haseo didn't

stand a chance against Ovan.

"Haseo! ♪" Someone called out to Haseo, who was looking past the fountain in the Central District and out into infinity.

"Zelkova."

Zelkova, the boy PC with fawn antlers on his head, was the former Guild Master of Moon Tree. Standing next to him was a lady PC in traditional Japanese clothing—it was Kaede, who had served as Third Division Captain.

"Thank you for before, Haseo," Kaede said as she rose from a bow. She was thanking him for stopping Sakaki and his *coup d'état*.

"It must have been a nightmare for you."

"What happened with Sakaki was most regretful. But one reaps what they sow."

The system had forced the guild Moon Tree to shut down. The official reason was because the PC, Sakaki, had served as ringleader for several illegal activities, including persistent PK harassment, slander in the message boards, and altering their @HOME. But if someone was going to be punished for persistent PK harassment, the battle-fanatic guild Kestrel should have been shut down first and foremost. As for the way the @HOME was illegally modified, that was just a cover-up by CC Corp's upper management. They were trying to dump the blame on someone else.

As a pioneer in advocating e-manners, this was a huge scandal for Moon Tree. Consequentially, the public opinion placed all of its attention on Moon Tree and its members.

"Not only *The World*, but the entire network has a rather low

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tolerance threshold.” Haseo sighed deeply, thinking of what he personally had been through.

“Have you given up pleading in your defense?” Kaede shook her head. Only the ringleader, Sakaki, and a few other players had had their accounts suspended, but everyone in Moon Tree was being treated poorly.

“If we tried to fight back, they’d go after someone who couldn’t retaliate for whatever reason and give them a solid beating. Everyone is afraid to say something only to get the cold shoulder.”

There were a fair number of people from Moon Tree who had quit *The World* altogether. Almost everyone who continued to play the game was reborn as a new character. There were some who had even started criticizing their former guild, Moon Tree.

“Kaede, are you still watching over Zelkova?”

“There’s no reason for me to stop being loyal to him simply because we lost our guild.”

Haseo thought he could hear people call her stupid for being loyal to someone in an online game even after the guild was gone. Was Kaede’s player role-playing as a lady-in-waiting who was loyal to her young master even after he lost his country? Her feelings—her love—for Zelkova pushed her to such lengths. Haseo had no idea what was going on between them and he wasn’t close enough to Kaede to find out. At any rate, the story of a master and his servant lived on because of Kaede’s love.

“Haseo, what’s happened since then?” Kaede asked. “What

happened after the incident with Moon Tree?”

Haseo wasn't sure how in depth he should go with a normal player like Kaede, nor how to describe what had been going on.

“Yata is a Lost One. The Epitaph Users of G.U. were defeated by Ovan in the Inverted City Megin Fi on the back of the Battle Dragon Mag Mell, which floats in the Coite-Bodher Battlefield,” Zelkova stated, putting Haseo at a loss for words.

Only the Epitaph Users and CC Corp's upper management were supposed to know about that.

“You always, *always* learn about the latest news,” Haseo said, staring at the most insightful little boy.

Come to think of it, Zelkova had known about Project G.U. and the AIDA right from the start. He had also known that his subordinate in the Seven Council, Nala, was actually Yata's second character.

There was Yata, who had reigned over CC Corp's Project G.U. as its leader. There was also the underground hacker, Ovan. Last but not least, there was Gabi, who controlled the hearts of the players through his massive guild. They represented the three extremities in *The World*, as one belonged to the system, another to the underground system, and the last represented the players.

Haseo saw Zelkova in a new light. Zelkova undeniably held his ground against those three giants.

“Just knowing things has its limits. I am powerless. That's why I couldn't prevent that incident with Sakaki.” It was unusual for Zelkova to sound so sad.

“Life wouldn't be so hard if we knew the future.”

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There was no way Haseo could have known that he would go from speaking with Gabi in Kestrel to running into Zelkova.

"You spoke with Gabi, didn't you? ♪"

"Supposedly Gabi and Ovan are like brothers. I wanted to get some info, but..."

"He treats everyone like that. ^_3^," Zelkova said and mimicked Gabi's emoticon.

"Are you friends with Gabi?" The way Zelkova spoke so fondly of Gabi indicated that there was more between them than just the fact that they were both Guild Masters of large guilds.

"We're old friends. ♪"

"Does that go for Ovan, too?" Haseo was bubbling with excitement. Zelkova didn't deny it as he stood there smiling.

"♪"

"Do you know Ovan's player in the real world?!"

Talk about lucky. Even CC Corp couldn't locate where he lived. But if Haseo could get a hold of this hacker who kept logging in illegally, then the problems in the Net could be resolved in the real world.

"I've spoken with him when he wasn't Ovan."

"Huh?"

"For example, Haseo, it would be like if I talked to you in the game as Ryo Misaki instead of as Haseo."

Even as Haseo admitted to himself that it made sense, he couldn't help but rub his temples in frustration. Somehow Zelkova had found out Haseo's real name. He had learned about Haseo's

player's personal data.

"What's his player's name?"

"I don't know. Also, I've never met him in the real world."

That put an end to that search. Haseo felt depressed as he asked, "What's his player like?"

"Well..." Zelkova made a motion that indicated he was thinking. "I imagine he's not much different from the image of him you get through his PC. He wasn't the type of guy to role-play."

"So he's a weirdo in real life, too?" Haseo asked with a frown.

"I personally like him," Zelkova said. He continued a second later as if he had just remembered something, "Oh, yeah. He has a daughter."

"A daughter...?" Haseo repeated. Naturally, Ovan had never mentioned anything about this.

"Ovan has a daughter. I'm not sure if she's his daughter in the real world or not. All I know is that she ... well, she uses a girl PC that looks like she's about my age. She's a Shadow Warlock and her name is...."

"What is it?"

"Her PC's name is Aina."

"Aina..." Haseo repeated in a hushed whisper,

"The AIDA," Zelkova said, his white face dyed by the light of the setting sun, "is infecting the game data like a virus. It's decaying the programs that run *The World*. Ovan has turned himself into poison and is rendering the CC Corp's upper management

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powerless. Both in the real world and online, *The World* is mostly under Ovan's control."

"So this is no longer the same *The World* as before." Kaede sighed, awakening Haseo to the reality of the situation.

Even if the graphics seen through the display were the same as before, there was an inner part of the game that normal players couldn't see. *The World* was being influenced by the original game creator, Harald Hoerwick, and his usurper, Ovan.

"Take this! ♪" Zelkova chirped as he handed Haseo his member address. "Be sure to keep in touch," he added with a smile before leaving together with Kaede.

Haseo had no choice but to accept the address with mixed feelings, unsure of what was running through Zelkova's mind.

"*The World* no longer promises anything," said a beautiful Blade Brandier with roses decorating his hat. Haseo spun around to face him.

"Promises...?" Haseo probed.

A void had formed at the Inverted City Megin Fi, back when they had caught a glimpse of the giant Corbenik. This bridge, that canal, the town, and even the sun were filled with a void.

Haseo shivered. Who could promise that the sun would rise the next morning with that man standing before them? Would they have to abandon their human hearts after facing the truth that Ovan was Tri-Edge?

"But there's no such thing as a future more terrifying than one

without Mia," Endrance stated as he pulled out Macha. He gently ran his fingers across the blade that held his cat's soul.

"We made a promise. We swore we would always be together, you see."

If Haseo wanted a promise, he had to make one. He wasn't alone any longer. He had friends. He had siblings of Morganna who also held Factors.

"Because you're no longer alone, no one can ever replace you. You already have people who feel that way about you. They care about you because you're you, Haseo."

"Huh...?"

Endrance suddenly pointed Macha at the still-confused Haseo and said, "Ovan.... That monster only sees you."

Even now, Ovan was spreading his soul throughout the ultimate dimensions of *The World*. The only person who even entered his line of sight was Haseo, who could bring his story to a higher level.

"I..." Haseo looked at the reflection of the sun on Endrance's blade.

"The enemy is too great. He is the image of a father that is absolute, but nothing is absolute," Endrance stated before stabbing Macha into the ground.

Black bubbles rose from the crack of broken data on the stone ground. It felt as if something was suddenly vanishing from around them.

"Ugh—!"

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“AIDA hide within a sea of data found just under the ground.”

The spawn born from the AIDA on Ovan's left shoulder was devouring everything underneath the stone pavement Haseo was standing on in Mac Anu. Haseo trembled as fear suddenly overtook him.

Haseo had to contact Pi. He needed to ask her to find out about the PC, Aina—Ovan's daughter, according to Zelkova. Plus there was one other thing. He had asked her about something back when they had run into each other at the hospital.

I've been to that hospital before. He needed to know why he had been struck by *déjà vu* when he visited the hospital wing Yata was staying in. He had several mysteries to solve. He needed to solve the mystery behind Ovan, as well as the one about himself. He was his own greatest mystery.



RAVEN @HOME SERPENT OF LORE

There was a canvas-like wall filling the room. A tree graph that displayed the universe as if it were graffiti drawn by God covered the canvas. In the center of the pictures on the wall hung a relief of an Uroboros, a snake eating its own tail. A ring (or circle) was the origin of everything. According to the psychiatrist Jung, it could be compared with a newborn baby. It started out a lump, free of logic

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and desire because it had not fully formed self-awareness. It was not fully conscious, making it chaotic. But in a giant loop, everything would be melted together like the primordial oceans that served as the soups of life. Another example was how a snake shedding its skin represented immortality and the way ate its own tail represented self-sufficiency.

A human baby would eventually awaken to self-awareness in order to survive. But in *The World*, the Uroboros never stopped eating its own tail and the Serpent of Lore never stopped rotating.

The World's integrated observation system gave the lady Tribal Grappler a single answer to her command.

That's crazy!

The answer the Serpent of Lore gave Pi was completely unexpected. Reiko had made some inner-company trades while upper management was still in chaos so she could obtain access to the Serpent of Lore. Until then, the account had been frozen due to Yata's dismissal. The information windows displayed paperwork that had been digitally saved. It was a medical file. It was dated 2010.

Reiko's PC had been given greater access than was typical. She had the same degree of access to the system that Yata had enjoyed. Excluding upper management, she had obtained the highest level of security available within the company. Naturally, this meant that Yata had glanced over this medical chart. Seven years ago during the Morganna Incident, he had played an important role with his PC, Wiseman.

Yata.... Mr. Hino, you knew all about this.

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That was the conclusion she had reached. Takumi had kept this information to himself in order to maintain a mental advantage. He wasn't doing it to be mean. That's just the type of kid Takumi was. Pi was both surprised and saddened that he had never told her. She felt heavy-hearted when she thought of the emotional impact this would have on Ryo.

Come to think of it, all of the Epitaph Users had seen a glimpse of their Avatar's archetype as irregular monsters called the Eight Phases of Morganna at the Chamber of Epitaphs in Balbol Museum. Seven years ago the Eight Phases were the eight personas of the Morganna System, which had become sentient. It was their job to prevent the hero Kite from meeting the ultimate AI, Aura, whose birth was imminent. For instance, the image that was displayed before Pi was the Seventh Phase, The Avenger, Tarvos. The terrifying monster looked like a worm or leech that had been skewered through the head by a rusty sword.

Pi looked up at the wall. The Uroboros continued to spin as it recorded all of the data in this rotating world. Even now.

"The Serpent of Lore had known." But even so, it could only answer questions asked of it. The snake was obeying its instinctual drive for food as it continued to devour information. While the Uroboros held everything, it was also the self-concluded symbol of infinity.

Pi had to tell him. She had to tell Ryo about this. It was important that she told him in person in the real world, not through an online chat or e-mail.

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“IT WAS JUST AS HAD BEEN WRITTEN IN ‘THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT’ WHEN THE KING OF LIGHT AND THE QUEEN OF DARKNESS WERE ALLIES IN THE WAR.

“DURING THE MORGANNA INCIDENT, ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS IN PROJECT G.U. WAS CONFIRMED: ONE OF THE SIX COMA VICTIMS, SORA, WAS FREED.”

Just then, a voice called out to Pi. It was via personal chat. Pi felt like the blood in the back of her head was going to boil when she saw the sender’s name.

“Wha—?!” He was right behind her. The sign on the supposedly impenetrable Serpent of Lore began to glow red from the presence of the intruder.

TWO

Sif was called the Beautiful-Haired Goddess. Her golden hair shone brightly, making her the symbol for rich crops of wheat. Sif was the goddess of fruition.

Sif Berg was a mansion “filled with all the desire in the world.” Amongst adventurers, it was said that the mansion was filled with mountains of gold taller than the largest man in the country, even if he raised his hands high up above his head. Reliefs of vanity, gluttony, sloth and other sins adorned the endless rows

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of doorways leading to various rooms. The amount of desire that escaped into the world varied depending on how widely the door was opened. Too much desire could create discontent, but not enough could cause stagnation.

⓪ HIDDEN FORBIDDEN IN HEAT, SUGAR MANSION SIF BERG

The foul stench of something burning assaulted Pi's nose. The sky looked as if it were being burned by a broken furnace. Liquid gold poured against the roof like a heavy downpour of rain, making a glistening stream of mud on the ground. It was a mansion made of gold.

"Sif Berg..." Pi whispered.

According to what she had read about *The World R:2*'s background story, the Sugar Mansion Sif Berg was where three sisters dwelled. The oldest, Sprakki, measured the desire. The middle sister, Erna, opened the door to release the desire. The youngest sister, Feima, carried out the role of shutting the door, thereby preventing any further desire from leaving. But the youngest sister, Feima, had a tendency to get lazy and let desire overflow into the world. That's what caused immorality and war.

It went without saying that the story writers at CC Corp had taken the Fates from Greek mythology to use as their motif for the background story in *The World R:2*. The only difference was the Greek ones were fearsome goddesses who spun the thread of life and measured it before cutting it. But the story didn't end there. Before

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CC Corp's story designers knew it, an area in *The World* had appeared to match the story. It was part of the autonomy.

Although the majority of the players didn't know it, *The World R:2* no longer matched Emma Wielant's original story, even down to the mythology.

Reiko used her controller to make Pi move forward as she looked for the mansion's entrance. The river of burning lava penetrated the area, creating a complex maze. Pi's legs were dyed by the gold glowing red from the heat. The light reflected off of her from below, creating the silhouette of a shapely woman.

When she passed through the mansion's doors, her map suddenly changed. She had been transported to an entryway filled with golden furniture. There wasn't anyone in the entryway, which had been carpeted in red. The distinct lack of monsters was common for a Lost Ground such as this.

She followed the red carpet until she came to the first door. She targeted the door to open it.

"That is why I shall name her Aura.

This child would have been impossible without you.

The child Aura glows with light.

I shall entrust her with our will.

I shall entrust her with our future.

She is our..."

The second Pi opened the door; she could hear a delusional-sounding voice riding on the static noise in the wind. Reiko tried to bottle in her surprise, but since she was an Epitaph User, her PC, Pi, reacted to her feelings and came to a dead halt. They were in tune with each other today more than usual.

Whose voice was that?

Aura... Aura, huh? Pi knew exactly who he meant.

He was going to say “daughter” when he said, “She is our...” There were only two people who considered themselves parents of the ultimate AI. And that voice belonged to a man.

“Harald Hoerwick?!” She immediately thought of a nervous and strict German man of whom she had seen pictures in his files. Harald had vanished ten years ago. That meant this voice must have been a recording. The sound quality had deteriorated horribly.

There was another room beyond the doorway, with a door on each of the three walls facing her.

Hmmm. After Pi decided which door to take, she walked over to the second one and targeted it. The door creaked as it opened.

“I really must....

speak with Morganna.

But my physical body

makes it hard to see her.

Even so, I must go.

It's for our dear Aura.

Emma, please give me courage....”

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Harald's voice recording had started up again. Morganna was the name of the key system used in the MMORPG *The World* as it sampled the human thought necessary to create the ultimate AI. Morganna was the womb for the AI. But Morganna had unexpectedly grown self-aware. In order to save herself, she tried to destroy the ultimate AI, Aura, who was going to serve as her replacement. If that voice was trustworthy, Harald had wanted to change the Morganna System's mind.

Toward the end of 2007, the Beta version of *The World*, called *Fragment*, was tested for a few months before *The World* was released to the public. Ever since then, the missing game creator, Harald, had been observing the Morganna System's progress. No one knew when it happened, but at some point during the sampling process, Morganna developed self-awareness even though she was supposed to be nothing more than a tool used to gather information. That was when the surrogate mother began to rebel. She learned how to prevent the ultimate AI's birth, which was when Harald made his move.

His physical body was getting in his way...?

The next room was of the exact same design as the previous one. Each wall had its own door. It reminded Pi of video game dungeons that had infinite loops or doors that could warp the player to different areas. Mapping the area wouldn't be effective. Pi trusted her intuition.

She moved to the next door and opened it. It was Harald's voice, which was broken from the damaged data.

*"Humans have physical limitations that are hard to avoid.
But AIs don't have a limit to how far they can advance.
I want to know where she'll go.
I want to see what lies before her."*

*"The ultimate AI will make mistakes, just as humans do.
There can be no room for growth if she does not make mistakes.
The difference is that she will not repeat the same mistakes.
Harald, it's now or never."*

*"Just as the earth is the womb for death and rebirth,
the maternal goddess is the goddess of life,
but also the goddess of death, who welcomes the deceased."*

*"As such, the maternal figure is both sides of the coin of life and death.
This manifestation was inevitable.
Morganna Mode Gone
has rejected my intervention."*

Harald had needed to go see the surrogate mother, Morganna, and have a talk with her. How in the world had he transformed into a traveler in *The World*?

But he failed to change her mind. Morganna had rejected Harald. That was when the Second Network Crisis occurred seven years ago.

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What had happened to Harald? Had his mind turned into fragments, trapped within *The World*? Was he a ghost, wandering the network? Maybe those ghost stories in the office weren't as absurd as she had thought.

The next room looked just the same as the others. Pi's only options were to move forward or to go back. He had told Pi to come alone. Only then would he tell her.

Jun....

He was going to tell her the truth about Jun Banshouya's disappearance. That was the main reason Reiko was playing *The World*. Two years ago, Jun was the original leader of Project G.U. He took responsibility for his failure to the company and quit CC Corp, after which he vanished into thin air. But after seeing what upper management had done to Yata, she thought that they might have shifted the blame onto Jun Banshouya and dismissed him.

Reiko wanted to restore her brother's honor. Even if it was hard to do on the social level, she wanted to at least restore his honor in her own heart. Just believing in him wasn't good enough. She had to know the truth. If she was going to turn her eyes away from that truth, then there was no point in playing *The World*.

Pi took a quick glance at the three doors and walked toward the one in front of her without a further moment's hesitation.

"Evolution is...."

The surroundings suddenly changed. She was in a large golden hall with a stairwell. The wall was covered in an infinite number of doors, all of which were three or four stories high. Up on the balcony were three half-naked goddesses wearing diaphanous dresses. They cackled as they flew about. They opened and closed doors as if playing some sort of game.

Sif Berg was a sugar mansion filled with all sorts of desires.

"You got a 100%," the irregular Steam Gunner Ovan congratulated Pi with a casual applause.



The man who had summoned Pi to the Sugar Mansion Sif Berg was standing right in front of her. The man in the tinted glasses smiled and said, "I'm impressed you knew which doors to go through." He used the same sweet voice a lonesome man might use when playing with his cat.

"I smelled my way through," Pi answered bluntly. "The smell was coming from your PC ... or maybe from the AIDA canned up in your left arm?"

"It's canned up...?" Ovan burst into gleeful laughter. There was a big lock on his hack of a barrel-casted left arm. It looked like the Tri-Edge AIDA was asleep in the can.

"I see you have a heightened sense of smell. So, what did it smell like? Corn beef? Fried beans? Syrup? Or maybe cat food?"

"Blood. A woman's blood." Pi snorted and rubbed her nose over the stench.

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“Oh, you mean your blood.”

Pi had faced Ovan at the mausoleum in the Inverted City Megin Fi, where his true identity had become known. She had been hit by a surprise attack from the Tri-Edge AIDA that had been sealed away in his left arm. Pi, Atoli and Endrance had been PKed in one blow.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t take my time and play with you at Megin Fi. You see, Haseo was in such a hurry. There just wasn’t enough time for us to open up and have a heart-to-heart. I may have killed you, but getting PKed is of little consequence. Oh, yes. I realized that you want to draw your story to a close.”

Ovan was at ease. That was why he was going to devour her soon. He was going to devour Pi’s story as an Epitaph User—the “power” to make her own story in *The World*.

He ticked her off. This was degrading. But no matter how strong Reiko tried to sound, her voice still cracked. Her legs were trembling. Her armpits were drenched with sweat from the crushing tension. The only good thing about any of this was that Ovan could not see her like this in the real world.

“I’m here. Now it’s your turn,”

Reiko mustered the courage to jump straight to the point. Ovan had called her here, making Pi his welcomed guest.

Ovan tilted his head to one side, as if he didn’t know what she was talking about. Pi was annoyed at how he dodged her question. She went into a fighting stance and materialized her Avatar as if to show him she wasn’t up for any games.

Ovan made a little show of acting afraid of Pi's fierce Tarvos.

"Out with it," Pi urged as she sidled into her gauntlet's attack range.

Just as the thread of tension was about to snap, the man in the tinted glasses stated, "Triangles and squares are the same."

Building blocks in the shape of an equilateral triangle and a square appeared to the right of Ovan. To the left of him was a 3D model of a donut and a coffee cup. The images were floating in the air like objects in the game.

"A donut and a coffee cup are the same. Why?"

"Because they have the same number of holes," Pi answered instantly, even though she was unsure what he was getting at.

"You are brilliant," Ovan grinned, though he didn't say if she was right or not.

The ring-shaped donut suddenly began to change form, as if it were made from clay. It was transforming into a white coffee cup with a handle. The original coffee cup also began to transform, turning into a fluffy ring-shaped donut. The triangle and square building blocks transformed into four-legged chairs and a table.

"Have a seat, miss," Ovan offered and took a seat.

Pi dematerialized Tarvos and sat down at the table, which had coffee cups and donuts on it.

"Topology," Pi said.

According to a certain type of mathematics, donuts and coffee cups shared the same number of holes, making them

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indistinguishable. Mathematics was outside of Reiko's specialty, but she knew that a ring-shaped donut made from clay could be transformed into a coffee cup with a handle without having to punch any new holes. The important thing was the number of holes—homeomorphism between the two shapes was possible because the topology was the same so long as they shared the same number of holes. The size of the hole, along with the length, shape, and thickness of the object were invariant and therefore unimportant. Inversely, an equilateral triangle could not morph into a ring-shaped donut. If a coffee cup transformed into a table, it would make for an outlandish table with a hole in it somewhere.

"Have some coffee."

Pi took Ovan up on the offer and held the coffee cup up to her mouth.

"It smells good," she said. The former-donut-now-coffee cup was filled with fresh-smelling coffee.

"According to topology, the shape's physical qualities are determined by how it is going to be used. If you like, it could turn into chocolate or cookies. It's context-sensitive."

"Context...." When Pi reached out for a donut, the former-cup-now-donut began to transform into a ring. The ring went on Pi's middle finger on her right hand.

"You see?" Ovan said and got up to stand next to her.

The half-naked goddesses' sweet cackling echoed across the exquisite hall in Sif Berg. Pi held the ring up to the light of the molten gold.



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"Why did you give this to me?" she asked.

"It's a secret. It's training for your soft brain. I have no intention of talking with someone who only acknowledges her own beliefs. It would be merely a waste of time. Who was it that said the only time you can flip through a book to find the answers is when you're reading a school textbook?"

"Did I pass?"

"So far. That was just an introduction to the overly renowned topology. Do you know about the Poincaré conjecture?" Ovan asked.

"I've heard a little on the news. I might have learned about it in some college lectures, too."

"The conjecture states: Every simply connected, closed 3-manifold is homeomorphic to the S^3 sphere. Simply put, the homotopic sphere taken to the n th dimension is the same as an n -manifold sphere."

"Does that make sense to you?"

"I'm not sure," Ovan answered honestly and shrugged. "I'm more into the humanities, personally."

The French mathematician Poincaré had predicted this a hundred years ago and a hundred years later, no one had been able to prove its accuracy one way or the other. It wasn't until this century that the Russian mathematician, Grigori Perelman, was (supposedly) able to prove it.

"Perelman proved the Poincaré conjecture through a means other than topology." When Perelman stood at the podium to explain his proof, the distinguished topologic mathematicians who

were present couldn't understand his methods and were disappointed. They were further disappointed that he had supposedly proven something they failed to comprehend.

"When one points their finger to the moon, oh ye fool, shall gaze upon the fingertip," Ovan said poetically.

"That's from 'The Epitaph of Twilight,' right?" Pi had already finished studying Emma Wielant's "The Epitaph of Twilight" on her own. She was as knowledgeable about it as all the biggest fans.

"It means that those who only care about methodology will stagnate in place."

Ovan's answer finally led Pi to understand where he was coming from. This man was talking about himself. Through his conversation with Pi, Ovan was reinforcing his own story and trying to prove it to her.

"I see.... But Perelman didn't prove anything on his own."

Perelman was only able to prove the Poincaré conjecture to be true through a hundred years worth of research mathematicians had conducted before him.

"That's why he didn't accept the Fields Medal or the prize money. He quit his job at the university and holed up in an apartment. It's said he lives off of his mother's pension. So what is he doing now?"

"Living a life no one wanted."

Humans called "geniuses" always had the visitor called "solitude" come knocking on the doors to their hearts. It was the same with Harald Hoerwick. It was true even for Ovan.

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"Awaken your self-awareness."

"Huh...?" Pi wasn't sure how to respond to Ovan's unexpected demand. He had changed topics the way that donut turned into a coffee cup. Was this conversation just another form of homeomorphism?

"Harald Hoerwick traveled to another world so he could confront the rebellious surrogate mother, Morganna. His trip to the underworld was part of the oldest story born from *The World's* autonomy." He was referring to the recordings of Harald's voice Pi had heard upon entering Sugar Mansion Sif Berg. Ovan had probably set the audio recording on play.

"Haven't you taken this far enough, Mr. Ovan? I came to learn why my brother disappeared and—"

"In most mythology, the goddess of the earth has two faces. If you receive the Earth Goddess's blessings, the crops are plentiful. If you anger her, the crops wither away. She represents fertility and destruction. She's two sides to the coin of life and death.

"In Greek mythology, Persephone was the maiden goddess of harvest. She was tricked into eating a tainted pomegranate from the Underworld and was forced to wed Hades. The number of pomegranate seeds she ate represented how many months she had to live in the Underworld. The upper world was a sterile land during the winter, while she resided with her husband.

"*The World's* fertility goddess of antiquity would be Morganna Mode Gone...." Ovan seemed to have absolutely no desire to chitchat as he lectured about whatever came to mind.

Indeed, he was just as Haseo had described. That's what made this man such a weirdo.

Pi had believed Ovan when he'd sent her a personal chat claiming he could tell her about Jun Banshouya's disappearance—even though trusting this man was foolhardy—and she had come to meet him in this Lost Ground. Pi was unable to hide her frustration any longer.

"That's enough!" Pi shouted as she stood up. The table and chairs lost their form and turned back into building blocks.

"People's imaginations aren't as free as they'd like to think," Ovan said, catching the coffee cup before it hit the ground. "Whenever people try to generalize the spiritual world, the stories always integrate into certain patterns. That means the materials overlap. Incidental synchronicity—'The Epitaph of Twilight,' which formed the base storyline for *The World*, was unable to escape from the mythology archetypes found worldwide. In all actuality, it should be difficult to critique Emma Wielant's 'The Epitaph of Twilight' from a literary perspective. Isn't that right? It sounds a bit cruel, but Emma was a young woman just having fun writing delusions that were influenced by Steiner's seminars on Anthroposophy after she had some *spiritual* experience."

"Fans throughout the world would kill you for saying that."

It was true that the setting and background story for *The World* might be a patchwork quilt made from major Western mythology, including Celtic, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Greek, along with the model for modern fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings*. The same went

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for the story creators for *The World R:2*. It was also composed of mythology from all sorts of places. Even Haruka Mizuhara and the other "Epitaph" freaks accepted as much (though there were some believers who absolutely refused to acknowledge that).

"It's better than an original story that is distorted and unpleasant," Pi shot back. She argued that "The Epitaph of Twilight" was beautiful and sophisticated because it utilized pre-existing mythology.

"You've missed the point. Emma was not trying to write a fantasy story that would excite little girls and boys. I believe you're aware that she was a devout believer in Steiner's teachings. She wanted to write about the spiritual world—it was both art and ideology. Or am I mistaken...? And then Emma abandoned her work. She left the beautiful story still beautiful ... still incomplete."

"She died in an accident."

"I'm sure she did. The story Emma had started to spin fell apart because of her death and the First Network Crisis. The story was only kept alive through Harald. He took his beloved Emma's story and made it the base for *The World*, even though it was incomplete. Emma Wielant's 'The Epitaph of Twilight' has been apotheosized as the greatest fantasy story of the twenty-first century simply because no one *can* read it. Never mind the fact that no one has actually read it."

Because of that, there were all sorts of discussions about "The Epitaph of Twilight." There had been several attempts to make a movie of it.

"It would be for the best if 'The Epitaph of Twilight' was never restored," Ovan asserted. "Everyone dreams of their own ideal version of 'The Epitaph of Twilight.' Both the writer and the readers are happy this way."

Pi reflected on her debate with Haruka Mizuhara before answering, "Emma had wanted to write about her ideals of the spiritual good, which would not have mixed well with the heroic fantasy her readers wanted to enjoy. Emma wasn't a professional writer creating stories for entertainment purposes. According to Anthroposophy, practicing the arts is a form of training to help develop supersensory perception. The more honest Emma was to herself, the better the training. Of course, no one reflects upon the writer's personal circumstances."

"Even if the original copy of Emma Wielant's 'The Epitaph of Twilight' were to be found, the fans would grow tired of it because it would be a difficult and boring read. The original manuscript would no longer be considered as such and may even be outright rejected. It isn't about whether it's real or not, but whether you want to believe in it or not. If someone just found the New Testament, or a recording of Jesus' voice, would the Vatican make it open to the public?"

Just then, a poor recording of Harald's voice began to play.

"Evolution does not necessarily mean progress.

Evolution often points in a vector of change people do not desire.

It is insolent to reject change because you do not wish for it.

Rejecting change is rejecting other possibilities.

Allow for diversity."

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His voice sounded hoarse, as if he was on his deathbed.

"In other words, Harald was trying to scream, 'Keep out of this. To hell with how everyone expects you to mature!'" Ovan summarized vehemently before bursting out into laughter.

Harald had carved a place in the academic world as an expert on AI engineering. He could support himself by conducting research for universities and research facilities that were worthy of him. As the creator of CC Corp's *The World*, he had the right to a fortune. But he cast it all aside for his love of Emma.

People probably ridiculed him. They must have called his actions preposterous and foolish.

"Even if it meant living a life no one understood, he still..." Reiko whispered with a shiver. In order to find out why her brother had gone missing, she had gone against everyone's admonitions and accepted a job at CC Corp. Reiko had essentially abandoned her previous job, leaving a trail of scorning superiors and backbiting workmates. There were no goodbye parties or farewell flowers. Who had the right to tell Harald or Reiko what they could or could not do if it was to meet their ultimate goals?

"Our psychological obsession with knowledge leads us down a lonesome path."

The coffee cup in Ovan's hand was continually changing forms. One end turned into a rope that stretched up to the ceiling and the other end turned into a noose.

"Ugh!" The rope slung itself over Pi's head and around her neck like a wild animal. It was pulling up. Pi stood on her toes, tossing about in pain, unable to breathe. The building blocks transformed into portable bleachers, like the ones in a school gym. Pi materialized Tarvos and was just about to cut the rope.

"It's futile. It will no longer be the same thing if you cut it," the man with tinted glasses said with a wry smirk as he watched the woman suffer.

The noose around her neck was being lifted up by some unseen power. Pi was led to the bleachers like a pet on a leash. She was able to get a gasp of air when the rope loosened as she took her first step up the bleachers. The rope urged her to continue her upward climb.

"I used reason and adventure while Yata utilized experience and observation—we followed a single rope as we crossed the tightrope composed of the darkness of knowledge. But we were wrong. Whether through reason or experience, we were in the dark as we used the tightrope to aid our search."

Ovan pulled out an item. It was a piece of parchment paper.

"GAH HA HA HA HA HA HA!" A Dance Macabré in monk-like clothing was on the parchment paper, laughing so hard it looked like he had dislocated his jaw.

"Yata!" Pi had heard about what had become of him, but seeing it with her own eyes was more shocking than she could have imagined. The look of ecstasy on Yata's face in the paper was identical to the expression on the hospitalized Takumi's face. It wasn't a PC, but it was Yata. It was Takumi Hino. It was just like

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with the donut and coffee cup. Because they were one and the same, to put it in context, there was no reason for him to limit his form to that of a human. Especially for him in *The World*.

"Now then, God is dead," Ovan said as the introduction to his next story after violently rolling up the parchment paper with a maniacally laughing Yata on it. God was dead. The Ultimate AI, Aura, had vanished.

"Ngh!" Pi was forced to climb up the bleacher stairs. She counted how many steps there were. Thirteen—the same number of stairs leading to the gallows in the legendary capital.

"Harald and Emma wrote it together and I searched for it only to find that all the signs had been lost. Airceltraí, City of Dawn does not exist. There is no Heavenly Path. I was at my wit's end. Everything had been in vain. And that was when a strange visitor appeared at my door."

"Someone like Nietzsche?" Pi threw out the name of a philosopher as she was forced up the stairway to death. She was barely able to keep conscious. An empty expression appeared on Ovan's face.

"The demon called 'nothingness' knocked on my door and forced me to adjust my soul. That was when I finally came to this realization: Aura is dead."

"So you've become nihilistic...?" Pi was dragged up the fifth and sixth steps. Whenever she climbed up the next step in an attempt to escape the strangulating pain, the end of the gallows came all that much closer.

"That has a rather negative ring to it. Nietzsche was not preaching about darkness that was sweet and shallow in which the young, smart youth could hide their incompetence. He wasn't denying the present situation. Because he had met 'nothingness,' he could sing a song praising humanity as he acknowledged his self-awareness. It takes a strong heart to resist the nothingness. People only have their own spiritual courage, since no matter how hard they pray, God is dead."

"Avatars...." Pi gasped with realization.

"Exactly. An Epitaph User's power comes from the emptiness he embraces in his heart. The Epitaph User has to be jolted into awakening. It requires a motive strong enough to shake his very soul. Pi, your emptiness came from your brother, Jun Banshouya."

The Epitaph Users required a strong shock to their soul to awaken. Endrance had lost Mia. Atoli had lost herself. Sakubo had lost a part of himself through simply being him. Kuhn had lost his dreams of becoming a hero. Yata had lost Aura.

"As for Haseo, he has lost Shino Nanao. Losing her created a wound in his soul. It goes without saying that Harald's loss was the death of his beloved Emma. He was deeply hurt and had nowhere to vent his feelings. That's why he was able to accomplish creating his supreme masterpiece, the ultimate AI."

Pi had finally reached the thirteenth step. Beyond that there was the invisible fourteenth step, where angels were probably waiting for her. Just as she was about to step forward, Pi removed the ring on her right hand. She relied upon the context of their earlier

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conversation, remembering how the ring had transformed into a donut and a coffee cup. She turned the ring into a platform with a small hole in it and jumped on top of it. The rope finally grew loose enough that she could slip it off her neck. Pi toppled from the platform, tumbling to the ground. She coughed so violently she thought she might vomit.

"You truly are gifted," Ovan stated as he walked over to Pi.

"You're nervous."

"Hmm...?"

"You don't want to talk about Harald, do you? Well, Ovan?!" Pi screamed. This man had been talking about himself. The ultimate trickster had been repeatedly confirming to himself that he was right, like a pathetic little man.

Ovan came to a halt before taking a small step back. For the first time ever, Pi had the upper hand with this man.

"Did you want us to have some pillow talk and have me gently heal your heart?" Reiko's mental blow went through the display and whacked her opponent.

Boom! The sound rang in the air. The smell of gunpowder tickled Pi's nose. Corbenik, Ovan's Avatar, had appeared in his right hand. It was as long as a large rifle, with delicate engravings going down the length of the metal. It could easily attack Pi and render her unconscious before she got close enough to strike with Tarvos.

Ovan was the Epitaph User for the Eighth Phase, The Rebirth.

"Loss—it's a dirty feeling like pus oozing out of a wound. Fatigue, lamentation, sadness, hate and anger.... Sloughing off

resentment creates a kinetic power—it gave birth to my Avatar. It gave me the power to tell my own story,” Ovan explained. “As such, it is anger that leads to growth, not reason or experience.”

“Are you going to vindicate that through your self-awareness as Ovan?”

“I will recognize it. I will be freed from my physical body so that I can wield my power on the spiritual plane.”

“Then what is the shape of the emptiness in your heart that has let you give birth to your Avatar?!”

Ovan’s player had lost something. That was the core of this story. Pi had come to realize this at the last minute. If that was true, then AIDA wasn’t the main part of the story here! AIDA was just a factor in the story.

If Pi wanted to summarize the story revolving around Ovan in one sentence, what would it be?

“I repeat: Aura is dead,” Ovan stated, clearly ignoring what Pi had said.

“Answer me!”

“I never should have searched for the goddess. If she existed, it would have been in the form of cause and effect, karma, boundaries and processes. There are no eternal truths that stand unchanging in *The World*. The only thing here is creation and destruction. It is without meaning or purpose. It’s in a constant state of flux as the process repeats itself like a giant ring.

“*The World* is merely developing. Abandon your hopes, dreams and ideals of something other than yourself—a god, per se—

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blessing some hero with the truth. Abandon your prayers. You do not exist outside of yourself. You must accept the inner you of a higher plane. Recognize your spiritual supersensory perception.

"I am right here. That's where everything starts. I lost faith in my Brigade and accepted myself as I was here in *The World*. I stopped using logic to affirm the goddess I had never met and her truths. I stopped searching for her through experience. I let everything sink into my mind. My attributes—my senses—were not enough. Making my thoughts wrap around things wasn't good enough. I had to make things bow down to my way of thought. To do that I needed supernatural power—a spiritual sense—an Avatar! That is my form at a higher-level of existence," Ovan declared eloquently.

"A spiritual sense...? A higher-level of existence...?" Pi's voice was full of doubt. It sounded like he was talking about the occult, so her mind instinctively began filtering his words.

"Oh, you don't believe me? But you also wield a similar power."

"I do?"

"You can perceive things in this world through your sense of smell, making it supersensory perception." So that's what Ovan had been talking about.

People had five senses. But in an online game, the virtual world could only be experienced through the sights and sounds coming through the display. The Tarvos Factor had amplified Pi's senses, allowing her to smell things in *The World*, even though that should have been impossible.

"Ah!"

"In a world where people have two senses, you have an extra one, giving you supersensory perception. And yet you deny the possibility of supersensory perception in the real world?"

"There's nothing to fear. Your Avatar's powers do not come from some god. The power comes from us humans. This was how I gained the power to make my own story. I obtained power to rival that of the originals, 'The Epitaph of Twilight' and *The World*.

"I had to make that power mine. I had to become strong. I had to surpass my humanity and become a superman."

Ovan's Avatar, Corbenik, suddenly shone brightly. A person's mind had the power to change *The World*.

"Allow for diversity."

"Harald's goddess bends to my will." The ultimate AI, Aura, had no choice but to obey Ovan in the effort to create diversity. Ovan refused to be shaken from his path. He would show everyone his "power."

"You're too dangerous!" Pi whispered under her breath. The moment Ovan was within range, they both jumped into action.

The world was filled with blinding light the moment Tarvos's gauntlet hit Corbenik's bayonet.



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It was a white room. The room stretched for infinity. It might sound strange calling it a room since it had no walls, but it was definitely a room. Leather-bound books were scattered everywhere. The books had shadows. That meant that this area had a floor capable of reflecting light and shadow.

A man stood in the sparsely decorated room.

It's Ovan, Pi thought. The irregular Steam Gunner's back was facing her. She could see the armrest of a chair placed on the other side of him. It was a rocking chair. Small child shoes dangled in the air over the side of the chair.

Who is that? Pi wanted to know who was sitting in that rocking chair. Who resided in this empty room?

"The Epitaph of Twilight," Ovan said.

It sounded like he was about to tell a story. He was getting ready to tell the child sitting in the rocking chair a story.

"The Key of the Twilight, the ultimate AI, the Eight Phases of Morganna, and Harald Hoerwick," he said as he removed his glasses and stooped over the chair. Ovan's real face—although saying a PC had a real face might sound strange—looked kind. Pi was shocked by the difference between his expression now and when he was being weird.

"What melody would you like me to play—?"

I'm in Avatar Space! Pi realized. This area was created when Avatars touched. It was where Epitaph Users shared their memories. That would mean this was Ovan's memory.

Who was the kid in the rocketing chair? Pi had to know!

Is it a girl? That's what the faint scent she picked up indicated. At second glance, she could tell the shoes were girl shoes. The trickster's secret was within arm's reach.

"What melody will it take for the sleeping princess to awaken?" Ovan began to move before he had completed the sentence.

Ovan materialized his Avatar. He pointed Corbenik's muzzle, which looked like an anti-tank rifle's muzzle, at his "princess" in the rocking chair.

"DEVIL'S VERDICT!"

He fired a shot. The fancy light effects for a muzzle flash and gun smoke filled the display screen. The heavy sound of gunfire made the area seem like a battlefield as he shot Data Drain. The rocking chair trembled against the shockwave as the PC took a direct hit.

What in the world?! Pi was astonished.

Corbenik's Data Drain had been deflected. The PC's face looked inflamed, like it had rejected the attack. Black bubbles surged forth from the burns like maggots. They quickly healed the damage the PC's texture had taken from the Data Drain.

The face of a young girl appeared from below the black bubbles. Her character design was that of a ten-year-old girl. She was wearing a white dress that was covered in ruffles and lace, just like a Western-style doll. She looked like a gothic lolita.

A scar was etched into the young girl's chest. It was a sign.

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Going by how Ovan had called her a "sleeping princess," the player for this PC was probably a Lost One.

"Aina's injury is too deep," Ovan sighed with despair as he dropped Corbenik and fell to his knees.

Aina.... That was the name of this new character in the story. The girl was the last one to enter the stage.

Now Pi knew her name. The PC in the rocking chair was Aina. The AIDA infecting her had deflected a Data Drain from an Avatar. She had no idea such powerfully resistant AIDA even existed.

"I can't save you as I am now.... A normal Data Drain can't save you."

He *couldn't* save her. That's what Pi thought he said. This serial killer who wielded Tri-Edge's AIDA couldn't save her. Pi's thoughts were tossed in the mud. Why would a serial killer like Ovan try to save a Lost One? Why was Ovan trying to destroy the AIDA infecting a PC with a sign carved on her?

Just then, something strange started happening to Ovan's left arm, which had been sealed away.

"*Gaugh!*" Ovan screamed out.

Ovan clutched his left arm. The sight made Pi's blood curdle. The parasitic AIDA was devouring Ovan from the inside. He was mentally fighting against the agony Tri-Edge inflicted.

The pain Ovan suffered created an unsolvable puzzle that rejected all comprehension. This man was trying to save the girl with his right arm after poisoning her with his left. But why? What was the secret behind the trickster who was loved by both AIDA and Aura?

Pain.... Was pain the answer?

Ovan screamed in agony before Pi. According to Haseo, Ovan was immune to pain. Even a direct hit from an Avatar didn't hurt him. But the Ovan before her was impossible to describe, despite witnessing the event for herself. Even for the ever-clever Pi, it was difficult for her to concentrate. It was like her arms were full of fruit and she was desperately trying to not drop the round fruit on top of the pile. It took all she had just to hold onto a thread of thought.

Ovan began trembling. He must have run out of strength, for he collapsed in front of the rocking chair.

The answer to everything is in this Avatar Space. It's all in Ovan's memories!

"No, this is reality."

Pi hadn't expected this. Ovan had stood back up as if nothing had happened—it was like he hadn't felt any pain at all. He looked like an actor who had just finished his skit.

Pi was dumbfounded. She felt like all the fruit just fell from her arms. Ovan from his memories was talking to her. Pi was unable to comprehend the situation. How could Ovan from the past talk to Pi of the present?

"This isn't Avatar Space," Ovan stated simply. He shared a smile with the Tri-Edge AIDA, who was a support actor in the skit.

This wasn't Avatar Space.

Pi had been forcibly transported from Sugar Mansion Sif Berg to this white room in the blink of an eye. Everything she saw had just happened—this was current! Ovan had set up a little performance.

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"You just love messing with people's heads!" Pi yelled and glared wrathfully at Ovan.

"It's not like I was trying to deceive you. *You* decided what this was and tricked yourself. But what you just saw was probably exceedingly close to the core of the situation. Honestly, I should re-evaluate the sharpness of your mind, Pi. Even Kuhn and Haseo never made it this far."

In other words, Ovan's power—the magical power of the fiercest man alive—was fed from the loss of that girl in the rocking chair.

"Sleeping Beauty," Pi whispered as she looked at Aina in the rocking chair. The girl Shadow Warlock was like a motionless celluloid doll. She didn't so much as blink. Her mind was not with her PC.

"Ovan, you lost the player for that PC. Has everything you've done been to save a Lost One?" Pi asked. She had managed to calm her heart and was slowly edging toward Ovan.

Ovan's story is about how he's trying to save the Lost One, Aina. Was that the whole story? It was summarized in such a simple sentence.

"That's right," acknowledged the irregular Steam Gunner as he nodded.

That's when Pi learned the truth.

"If that's true, then that would mean the intelligent virus, AIDA, was the one who turned Aina's player into a Lost One."

"Correct." Ovan confirmed Pi's words to be accurate. There was undeniably a sign carved into Aina's chest.

"Then what is AIDA doing in your left shoulder?! Why did you PK Shino and turn her into a Lost One?"

Those two puzzles were a piece of Ovan's story and circumstances. It was not Ovan's ultimate goal to become god of *The World*, but simply a means to an end. Part of the story surrounding Ovan had been made clear, but the truth behind it was hidden deep within the darkness of knowledge.

That's when Pi realized something. There was a single book resting on Aina's lap. It was a leather-bound book: "The Epitaph of Twilight."

"The Epitaph of Twilight?" Pi gasped. That was Emma Wielant's incomplete epic poem.

"I found it in the black box left within *The World*," Ovan stated. Somehow, Pi had lost control of the conversation, for it had fallen back into Ovan's hands.

"The Epitaph of Twilight' was in the black box?"

"The Morganna Factors probably descended from this room. Even Yata with his Serpent of Lore didn't know of this room's existence. It's no surprise you didn't know of it yourself." Ovan tried consoling her.

Pi ground her teeth. She searched through her memory. She didn't think that Aina's name was on the list of Lost Ones CC Corp kept on record.

"Aina was probably the first Lost One," Ovan said and stood next to the rocking chair. He placed his hand on the young girl's shoulder.

"What's your relationship with Aina?" Pi may have learned the hard fact that Aina's player was a Lost One, but she still didn't

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know any of the underlying truths about Ovan. There was only one fact, but everyone held their own view of the “truth” in their heart.

“This girl is the only fact here. She is the reality that created everyone’s own individual truths as well as losses,” Ovan’s words were overflowing with a deep love for the girl. It was the same type of love one felt for a family member. Pi herself felt this way for her big brother.

“Is that child.... Is she your—”

“Aina,” Ovan called her by her name as if he knew her in the real world. “Her life is more precious to me than anything else.”

This was the story of Ovan—Masato Indou—trying to save Aina—Aina Indou. For just a brief moment, Pi could feel their relationship in the real world. She was his daughter. Ovan was her father.

Once Pi knew the trickster’s secret, she became powerless rather than the other way around. It was a sly trap. It would be hard for anyone, not just Haseo, to believe that this man could murder others so grotesquely. Did he look this gentle and sad when he put Shino into a coma? How about when he turned Takumi into a Lost One?

Ovan began talking about things, taking things at his own pace as he said, “We no longer receive blessings from Emma and Harald. The ultimate AI, Aura, is no longer alive. If the goddess here is truly dead, then a sharp mind must accept their spiritual form in this meaningless game.”

“Is that why you want to become a god?!”

"I must surpass my humanity." It was the only way for him to save his daughter. That was how Ovan justified the crimes he had committed.

"Do you think you can do whatever you want just to save your daughter?" Pi yelled.

That was Pi's last logical attempt at opposing him as Reiko Saeki. Did it justify sacrificing others, hurting them, and turning them into Lost Ones just so he could save his beloved daughter?

"Why must I take fools who whine like that into consideration?" Ovan wasn't going to back down.

"What?"

"Does it outrage your sense of morality? What are the grounds for your moral basis? Is it the law? Ethics? Common sense? Humans like you are absolutely terrified of saying the wrong thing. *The World* lacks an impartial view of what is just. There is no one truth. I repeat: God is dead. There is no law to punish characters in a story. This is the Net. This is *The World*."

"You're selfish."

"If that bothers you, try to stop me. Of course, you lack the power to do so," Ovan said and aimed Corbenik at Pi.

Pi got into a fighting stance with her Tarvos. The gauntlet's spikes glittered like rubies. They shone piercingly bright, emanating the desire to fight. Pi wouldn't make the same mistake twice. Now that she knew Tri-Edge's AIDA resided in Ovan's left shoulder...

"Let's work together. If you want to save a Lost One, our goal is the same."

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"You mean to say it's acceptable for a coffee cup to turn into a donut? But I don't plan to let my daughter become a guinea pig for CC Corp," Ovan spat. He wouldn't let Aina share the same fate as Shino, Takumi, and all of the other Lost Ones in that hospital. He *couldn't* allow it.

"You're just like Haseo," Pi grumbled. These men believed without a doubt that they were the only ones able to save those they cared for.

"There aren't a lot of good, obedient students like him these days, are there? That's exactly why no one will ever understand him."

"Probably."

"The same goes for you, Ms. Reiko Saeki. You are beautiful." Ovan admired her.

Ovan wanted to save his daughter. Pi wanted to save her brother. The strength of their feelings for a family member and the energy of their love could put them as equals in a fight.

A window suddenly opened in the white room and began running a video. Ovan had been completely cut from Pi's sight, so she prepared herself for a surprise attack. But her full attention quickly turned to the video.

"*To my dear sister,*" the voice began.

"Jun...?" Although the video had deteriorated horribly, that was undeniably Jun Banshouya. Pi knew without a doubt in her heart that this was her brother's voice.

*"Please forgive me for giving my last present to you like this.
It's too dangerous for me to speak with you in person.
But knowing how intelligent you are, I would like to entrust this with you.*

*"Use the PC, Pi, which I have prepared for you on my personal computer
and access the online game, The World.*

*"Doing so will slice open a new path in life for you.
The decision now is yours to make.
I pray that you follow your beliefs and sense of justice as you walk down
this fated path.
You are an Epitaph-User candidate."*

It was an e-mail from Jun Banshouya. The letter had been addressed to his sister.

*"There was a big age gap between us.
I left when you were still young, so I doubt you remember me all that well.
But I remember just the way you were.
I also remember hearing of your great achievements.
If I regret anything, it's that I won't get to see you one last time.
Please forgive me for failing to look out for you."*

The way he said "if I regret anything" made it sound like this was going to be his last message to her.

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"Oh, my brother...." Pi sighed, forgetting that this was an e-mail from long ago.

"Reiko....

Even after our parents break up and become estranged, we'll still continue to be siblings.

You are my precious little sister."

The second the static-filled recording came to an end, Pi's chest was filled with a burning pain.

"Grah!" Pi gasped, choking on a pool of blood. Black claws had cut the screen playing the video of Jun Banshouya into three pieces. The video crashed as it vanished.

"Going by the looks of it, I'd say this was your first time seeing that," said the movie conductor from the other side of the broken screen. The seal on his left arm had been removed. The three-fingered hand—Tri-Edge's AIDA—was piercing through Pi's chest. It felt like a mortal wound. Black bubbles boiled from the wound, evaporating all thought from Pi's mind.

"It looks like Yata didn't share this e-mail with you. Isn't he horrible? It's quite obvious that Jun Banshouya wrote this specifically for you."

Pi realized what that meant, even as her consciousness grew dim from the pain. This video message never made it to her. Someone had confiscated it before it could reach her. The culprit was probably the one who was a threat to her brother.

Was it CC Corp...? Although Pi tried to talk, her voice came out as an incomprehensible gurgle.

"It seems Jun Banshouya and his original Project G.U. made a terrible blunder. You've heard about the fire in CC Corp's main office building two years back, haven't you? G.U. came to a deadlock and after that fire, all of the Morganna Factors were scattered and lost.

"Supposedly Jun Banshouya took responsibility for the fire and left his position at CC Corp. It would seem that when he left he took the data regarding the Epitaph-PC, Pi, which held the Tarvos Factor, The Avenger. Apparently he used it for personal purposes. That's grand larceny. Do you know why your beloved brother dirtied his hands with such a crime?"

"Ngh!"

After Ovan confirmed that Pi couldn't answer even if she wanted to, he continued at his own leisure, "He did it to prevent Project G.U. from starting up again. He had been the supervisor for the group trying to revive the ultimate AI, and yet he tried to stop the RA Plan once it had reached its final stages.

"No one knows the truth behind Jun Banshouya's actions. Perhaps he viewed the RA Plan as developing a core that would destroy ethics in the name of prosperity. At any rate, he became brittle under the weight of his responsibilities. Rather than jump forward and take a risk, he fought to maintain our current situation. The truth of the matter is, Jun stole the Tarvos Factor and made a run for it. He knew doing so would make it difficult for CC Corp to renew its efforts with Project G.U."

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It was true that Project G.U. had been suspended just after the fire two years ago. Ovan continued with the preamble that everything he said next came from his own personal deductions.

"After that, *The World R:2* was released. Jun realized there was some sort of problem with the game as he observed it from hiding. An Epitaph-PC's power was needed to resolve the problem."

The AIDA phenomenon! Pi thought.

The AIDA phenomenon wasn't caught until after *The World R:2* had been released. It was hard to discern the exact time it was detected, but the game was released on December 24, 2015 and the first AIDA-like phenomenon occurred in mid 2016. Jun had anticipated that this abnormality that would eventually be called AIDA was a genuine threat.

"He was afraid that he would get you in trouble if he met with you personally, but this problem was too big to be ignored. It was dangerous enough that he was willing to risk the reactivation of Project G.U. if that's what it took to stop it. But Jun was a criminal so he couldn't return to CC Corp. The only one he could entrust his Epitaph-PC to was his precious, intelligent sister. Ms. Saeki, that would be you."

Since Jun had been the supervisor of Project G.U., he would have known that Reiko was an Epitaph User candidate for the Seventh Phase, The Avenger, Tarvos. But this e-mail was rather careless of him. Jun may have been on the run, but CC Corp still considered him a threat and had him under close observation. Even if the message had been encrypted, he had used an e-mail to confide the location of an Epitaph-PC. CC Corp stole the message without

getting caught. After that, they retrieved the company treasure that had been stolen from them.

That was when Jun vanished without a trace. He took the all-encompassing truth with him when he vanished. Reiko knew about what happened after that. Project G.U. was restarted under Yata. CC Corp's upper management scouted Reiko out and asked her to use Pi, the Epitaph-PC for The Avenger.

"Jun's letter never made it to his sister. But in the end, Jun's will was carried out anyway. You did excellent work under that arrogant brat Yata and the self-righteous, self-serving upper management at CC Corp. It was an intellectual job meant for an adult."

"Is he dead...?" Pi asked in a strained voice. Her eyes grew teary. Ovan said Jun's will had been carried out. That implied the will of someone already dead!

"Sorry, but whether he's dead or not is of little importance in this story," Ovan said apologetically and looked over at his symbiotic left arm.

A burning sensation slashed across Pi's thighs. She howled—Pi howled like a pathetic beast that fought against the trap that had caught it. The Tri-Edge AIDA had completely severed Pi's right leg. Epitaph Users got their power from the mental link they shared with their PC. When they were attacked by something with similar powers, the PC's player felt whatever pain their PC suffered.

"Now then, just how human are you?"

Pi's legs were cut off, then her fingers were severed one by one before her arms were cut off. Ovan crushed her bones and tore out innards that shouldn't have existed in the game world. The chunks of data that

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composed her flesh were shredded by the lightning-fast Tri-Edge arm.

"How much can we cut off before you quit being human?" Ovan asked as if conducting an experiment while carving into Pi. Reiko watched through the display as her character was cut apart as easily as if she had been thrown into a titanium blender. Her consciousness grew faint as the stench of red blood caked onto the white canvas of her mind. The only sense left to Pi was her sense of smell, which had been amplified by the Tervos Factor.

"I'm running out of time," Ovan stated.

Pi wondered if the stench Ovan was releasing bothered him at all. The more Tri-Edge's AIDA roared, the gaunter its host appeared. The Epitaph User Ovan looked like a haggard terminal patient.

"I must surpass my humanity." It was all he had to live for. Although he claimed to have abandoned all prayers, he offered one to a mere woman rather than to God. "Shino, give me the courage to see this through."

Ovan's story was not over yet. But Reiko had learned of her brother's demise, which had been her ultimate goal. This wasn't a matter of life and death. The way Jun had cared for Reiko as his sister, trusted her, loved her and entrusted something to her during the last moments of his life gave her the strength to carry on.

Pi's story had been brought to an end.

"Women..." Pi gasped. The PC, Pi, was the victim of a grotesque murder. She had been torn to pieces. So how was she able to speak? There really was no meaning behind adopting human form while in *The World*.

"Women don't die quietly," Pi whispered. "I will place a curse

on you.”

“Really?”

“You don’t know everything about Haseo.”

“Is that a bluff?”

“You’ll see.... But even you can’t know the full truth behind Haseo....” Those were her final words. Everything was buried by the smell of red blood. It was the same as if she were in a void of nothingness.

The trickster stood there expressionlessly after Pi dowsed him in her curse.

“See? Aren’t women scary?” he asked the Tri-Edge AIDA. He quickly glanced at Aina in her rocking chair before straightening his glasses.

“Can you still hear me?” he asked Pi.

Another window appeared within the white room. The video appeared to be a Banshouya File that had never been shared with Pi.

“THE WORLD R:2 WAS RELEASED ON DECEMBER 24, 2015. AS SUCH, THIS DAY IS REFERRED TO AS ‘THE DAY THE GODDESS DIED.’ THE TITLE WAS GIVEN IN REMINISCENCE OF THE ORIGINAL GAME BY FANS WHO WERE DISAPPOINTED WITH THE NEW STYLE OF *THE WORLD R:2*. IT IS AN IRONIC TITLE SINCE NORMAL PLAYERS HAVE NO WAY OF KNOWING ABOUT AURA’S DISAPPEARANCE.

“DESPITE HAVING LOST ALL OF THEIR GAME DATA IN A TRAGIC FIRE, CC CORP

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MANAGED TO RELEASE A NEW VERSION OF THE GAME WITHIN A YEAR. CONSIDERING THE INNER WORKINGS OF CC CORP, SUCH A FEAT SEEMS UNIMAGINABLY FAST. EVEN THOUGH THEY HAD ALREADY BEEN WORKING ON NEW GRAPHICS DATA AND BATTLE SYSTEMS, THEY MUST HAVE RUSHED TO MAKE ALL OF THE TEXT AND OTHER ESSENTIAL FACTORS NECESSARY FOR THE SYSTEM TO WORK.

“THEY DID AN INSUFFICIENT JOB AT DEBUGGING THE PROGRAM. AS A RESULT, BUGS WERE FREQUENTLY SPOTTED WHEN *THE WORLD R:2* WAS FIRST RELEASED. IT UNDERWENT FREQUENT MAINTENANCE AS IT DEVELOPED AS AN ONLINE GAME.

“OVER HALF THE EPITAPH-PCS WERE MISSING. THE ONLY ONE LEFT WITH CC CORP WAS THE EPITAPH-PC FOR THE PROPOGATION. SINCE PROJECT G.U. HAD BEEN SHUT DOWN, IT WAS STRICTLY GUARDED BY CC CORP'S SECURITY.

“I STILL HAVE THE EPITAPH-PC FOR THE AVENGER ON MY COMPUTER. I KEPT IT TO BRING AMAGI'S EXPERIMENTS TO A HALT.

—(CUT)— IN THE END, I HAVE ACHIEVED MY GOAL.

“I HAVE BEEN INVOLVED WITH *THE WORLD*, JOTARO AMAGI AND HARALD HOERWICK. AS SUCH, MY FINAL MISSION IS TO HIDE THE EPITAPH-PC FOR TARVOS. IT IS ALSO MY JOB TO WATCH OVER THE OTHER MORGANNA FACTORS FROM OUTSIDE CC CORP.

“BUT THINGS HAVE TAKEN A TURN FOR THE WORSE. OVAN IS THE EPITAPH-PC FOR THE REBIRTH. IT WOULD SEEM OVAN HAS ALREADY MADE HIS FIRST MOVE. HE CREATED A GUILD. THE GUILD’S NAME IS THE TWILIGHT BRIGADE! DOES HE KNOW ABOUT HARALD HOERWICK AND ‘THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT’?! WHERE DID HE GET THAT INFORMATION? DOES HE ALSO KNOW ABOUT MORGANNA AND THE ULTIMATE AI, AURA?

“THE PC, OVAN, CONTAINS INDISPENSABLE DATA IN HIS LEFT ARM, BUT WHAT EXACTLY IS IT? THAT MAN CARRIES A MONSTEROUS AMOUNT OF DATA.

“SOMEONE, ANYONE, PLEASE STOP OVAN. OVAN IS THE ROOT OF EVERYTHING. I REPEAT: OVAN IS THE KEY TO EVERYTHING.

“GUIDE TO AN UPRISING!

“THAT MAN WILL BE THE GUIDE TO AN UPRISING!”

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THREE

Ryo Misaki awoke from a short nap.

He had fallen asleep at his desk with his M2D still on. He wondered what time it was. He had almost never gotten a full night's sleep in his bed these past six months. He'd pull all-nighters playing *The World* and sleep during class at school. He had been logged on night and day throughout his entire summer break. The longest he ever slept was just under three hours. He was like a wild animal, catching quick catnaps before going back to work.

The night was drawing to an end. Summer was almost over. There were precious few days left in August. The season had reached its twilight. It felt as if the border between reality and the game was a song reaching an end.

There was a feeling of urgency attacking Ryo's heart.

"Hmmm...?" Ryo removed his M2D and turned around. The door was half open; a man stood in the doorway. It took Ryo a moment to fully awaken and realize that the man was his father. Even he had a family. He had parents.

When was the last time he had looked his father in the face like this? His father was the manager of a well-known manufacturer. Ryo didn't know the details; just that he was a career technician. Going by his father's academic background and age, his public success made him one of the elite. When Ryo was a young elementary school student, Ryo had honestly believed that

he would enter the same company as his father. His mother and grandparents also wished that of him. No one had stood between him and that future.

But then he got amnesia.

When Ryo was around ten years old, he contracted a paralytic disease. It infected his central nervous system, putting him into a coma. He had wandered across the border between life and death. He had miraculously recovered from the disease without any adverse side effects except for the isolated amnesia. The amnesia covered the time frame just before and after he fell into a comatose state. Even now, he couldn't recall what had happened back then.

Ryo had grown strong again by the time he entered middle school. No one so much as joked about him entering the same company as his father anymore. The only one who believed the promise he had made as a small child was his mother.

"What is it?" Ryo asked in a hushed voice as he looked up at his father. It was not like his dad was trying to peek in on his son while he slept.

His father asked in an even lower voice, "Were you playing that game?" There was no hint of anger in his voice. He wasn't there to lecture. Ryo didn't dislike his father, who never threw hysterical fits like his mother. Not that Ryo disliked his mother or anything.

"I know that you and Mom are worried about me." Rather than work his way to this part of the conversation, Ryo jumped straight to the point. He had thought carefully before choosing those words.

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He felt bad about acting like such a selfish son, but he couldn't explain what was going on. If they got in his way now, if they broke his computer so he couldn't play his game anymore, it would only create more tragedy. He needed them to quietly look the other way for just a while longer. Ryo wanted to say all of that, but he kept it bottled within. First and foremost, he had to acknowledge his lack of filial piety.

His father was struck speechless by his son's praiseworthy actions, even though the boy was on the verge of being forced to repeat a year at school. Through the faint light in the dark hallway, Ryo could see his father's expression soften.

"I will put an end to this," Ryo added. "I will put an end to this before summer is over."

His father answered, "I see." He probably thought Ryo had meant he would quit his online game by the end of summer break and begin studying for his college entrance exam.

"Get some sleep," his father said and started to shut the door.

"Dad," Ryo called out before he realized what he had done.

His father opened the door slightly as if urging him to continue.

"Where was I hospitalized seven years ago? I can't remember...." Ryo had no memories of the place. For some odd reason, none of the old photo albums had any pictures of the hospital. No parent would like to reflect back on when their son was bed-ridden. Supposedly his mother had destroyed all of the pictures from back then.

His father nodded his head and told Ryo the name of the

hospital. He then added, "Back then, you were addicted to a video game similar to this one."

"Was it an online game?"

Since Ryo's father graduated from video games with the Nintendo, he didn't seem to know if it was an online game or not. Ryo's mother was completely disinterested in video games, which probably added to her concern.

"There's no way my paralytic disease was related to me playing an online game," Ryo said sarcastically and turned around in his chair so his back faced his father. His father shut the door and returned to his room.

That's assuming it really was a paralytic disease to begin with, Ryo thought to himself. His ears began to ring. It was the same hospital.

Seven years ago, I was hospitalized in the same facility Shino's at right now. Ryo remembered the place. That would explain why his memories felt so muddled the other day at the hospital.

The stuffiness of his room made Ryo's throat hurt, so he quietly opened his curtains and the window. The night breeze was a little cool. It was a sign that the hot and humid days would come to an end within the next two or three days.

He looked down at his windowsill. There was a corpse. In the corner of the veranda was the corpse of a formerly noisy cicada. Before long, the hot season would be over.

Fact: If Ryo saved the Lost Ones, he would probably quit *The World*.

Fact: Ryo's parents would probably never know why he had

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devoted himself to *The World* like some sort of Net junkie. 1

He had a premonition. If he failed to put an end to everything, it would be because he lost to Ovan. He had to put an end to it all. He had to save Shino.

Ping! An electronic alarm went off. The sound informed him that someone had sent him mail from *The World*. Ryo put his M2D back on and opened his mail from the desktop.

The sender was....

"Ovan?!" Ryo choked.

Subject: G.U.

God is dead.

The age of heroes is past.

Nothing is true or absolute in this world.

Stop chasing after my shadow.

You cannot develop yourself by looking to others.

It's about time you realized that, for Pete's sake!

You can only find your archetype from within yourself.

You cannot borrow it like a mask.

Don't become a psychological leech.

Don't get satisfaction from the light of others shining on you.

Stop trying to secretly plagiarize someone else's path.

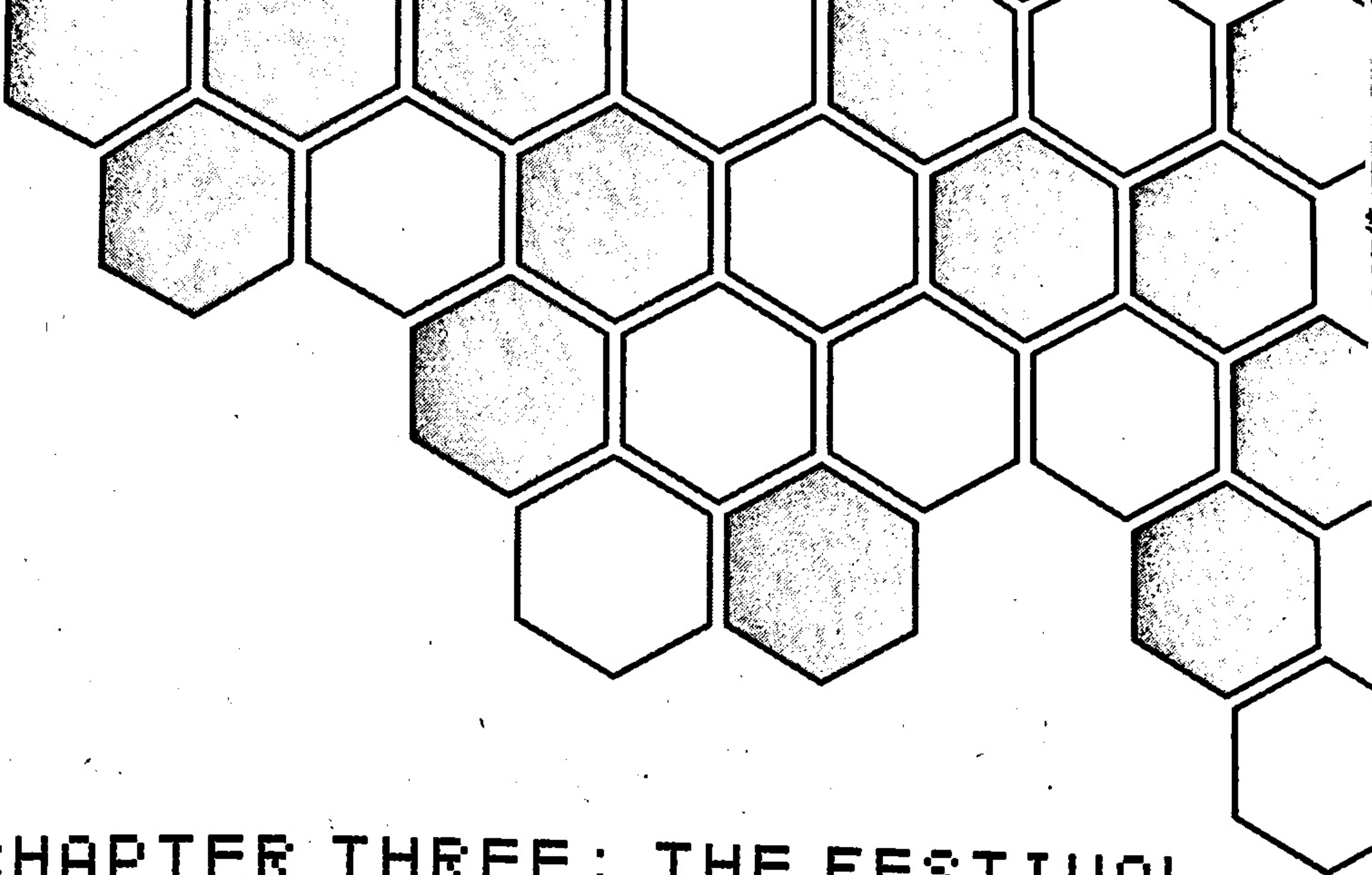
If you're going to steal someone's footsteps, kill them!

It was like a letter from a father or a big brother. It also felt like Ovan had directed those words toward himself. But Ryo grew pale when he saw the video attached to the message. He felt like he was going to barf. He was so shocked he didn't know what to say.

Ryo's cell phone began to vibrate from the desk where he had left it. Someone was calling him rather than just sending him a text message. When Ryo saw the name on the cell phone's monochrome screen, he quickly answered and yelled out, forgetting that it was in the middle of the night.

"Tomonari?!" He shouted the name he had just recently added to his contacts list. The caller was none other than Tomonari, or Kuhn.

"Is this Ryo?!" came an urgent voice. Ryo listened to Tomonari's explanation, his eyes glued to the image attached to the e-mail. It was Pi's decapitated head.



CHAPTER THREE: THE FESTIVAL

ONE

The World R:2 got shut down.

CC Corp announced to their customers that they would have to temporarily shut down their services due to server troubles. According to their progress reports, they were investigating both the hardware and software. It was uncertain when the servers would be up and running again. They weren't lying when they said that they would give discounted returns for the daily subscription fees for as long as the down time continued.

This was the way upper management handled things. They intentionally kept their reports of the truth fragmented, short and sweet. That way they could keep the most important information concealed.

The source of the severe server trouble was the strange and intelligent AIDA virus. Even though CC Corp had blocked all

•hack // G.U.

players from accessing the game, the traffic in *The World* continued to increase. The impact not only influenced CC Corps' servers, but the entire network. Countless systems were targeted and hit with "unidentifiable" trouble.

That trickster had made his challenge. CC Corp's upper management had made a secret deal with the illegal hacker, Ovan, allowing him to infect *The World's* mainframe with AIDA. Their foolishness created this irreparable predicament. Yet the upper management fought to protect themselves by concealing everything. It was the same as two years ago, seven years and even ten years ago....

Twilight was falling upon the golden ages. By shutting down Project G.U., CC Corp had lost its ability to supervise *The World*.

The humans had grown scared of the visitor called "night" since they had no means to defy it. Their fear of the darkness forced them to make rash decisions.

The Crest Gun was activated. That was the name of the ultimate weapon the humans had used to kill the gods and destroy Airceltra, City of Dawn. It spelled the destruction of *The World* R:2. It would bring about a dark nothingness worse than twilight or night.



Δ ROOT TOWN: THE ETERNAL CITY OF MAC ANU

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Someone stood atop a bell tower, bathing in the light of the setting sun. There weren't any PCs in the Central District just below. The only thing moving was the sparkling water in the fountain. *The World R:2* had been temporarily shut down—normal players were not allowed to log in. There weren't any admin in the Root Town, either.

The person standing there was Ovan. He was the last man still standing in this world.

"Are you lonesome?" Ovan asked his buddy attached to his left shoulder. The seal on the large cast had been removed. The black arm that grew from his shoulder, the Tri-Edge AIDA, reached out toward the sun.

"Oh sun, art thou God?" Ovan asked. "Jupiter, if you had several times more the mass you do, you could have become our second blazing sun. Mass and heat are what determine if the star will glow blue, white, yellow or red. But that just means their spectrum has changed. Is there a 'correct' form for the sun to undertake?"

The sun did not answer. It felt as if Mac Anu had frozen over. It was terribly cold here. There just wasn't enough warmth. The Tri-Edge AIDA shivered and went back inside its host like a turtle pulling its head into its shell.

Ovan told it not to goof off. He seemed somewhat annoyed with the arm.

"As such, when humans searched the outside for an unchanging, absolute truth, God died the second He was born."

The chaos created from twenty million users playing *The World* had given birth to the ultimate AI, Aura. The black box, the

Morganna System, that game creator Harald Hoerwick had left behind had sampled the minds of twenty million humans.

"Say, Yata. Your goddess is..." Ovan began as he pulled out his parchment paper item. The second he pulled it out, the rolled up paper flattened itself out on its own.

"GAH HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!" Yata had sealed himself within the parchment paper. He flew freely into Mac Anu's twilight sky like a magic carpet.

"What? Even you're leaving me now?" Ovan sighed.

The trickster spoke out to the rust-colored sky, "Warmth is created when hearts overlap. Stars are created and a god is born. Don't you see my friend here is getting lonely? It's always starving. Not even it can live without the warmth of others. People's interactions and personal exchanges are prepared and offered to it. It's a fragile creature of intelligence as it devours those exchanges with the utmost curiosity."

AIDA did nothing but reside within Ovan now. The man had become the only character in the story. The only thing keeping him going was his mind, which had been honed like red-hot steel.

There was still one more possibility left. Although AIDA was weak, it was also quite cunning. It would realize this other possibility before much longer.

"When that happens, AIDA will lose its reason to reside within *The World*." AIDA would probably transfer to the outside world if CC Corp decided to destroy *The World R:2's* servers. It would leave its village, cross the mountains that served as borders, and reach

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out into the real world. It would enter the wide open network sea. This wasn't the only world out there.

There would be devastation. The Elves worked so hard to justify their actions that they never realized the power within "nothingness." AIDA's magic would reach its zenith if it got out.

"That is when the true outbreak would begin. This is nothing more than a prelude of what is to come," Ovan looked up to the sky and declared to CC Corp's upper management. Ovan transported out of their bounds of knowledge, effectively hiding his whereabouts.



It was the middle of the night. Ryo had rushed to the hospital, only to be greeted with an unexpected sigh of irritation.

"Now Misaki's here," Reiko said flatly as she sat up in her hospital bed. Her face was pale, but she didn't look like she was in terrible shape.

"What the—?"

"Bill me for the taxi fare later."

Ryo had been on the verge of tears when he first heard that Reiko had fallen unconscious, so he now found himself at a loss for words. He glanced at Tomonari, who had called to inform him.

"Well, there you have it." Tomonari looked like he had just arrived himself. He wasn't sure what was going on either. He looked over to Reiko's doctor, Dr. Kurogai, for help.

"Ms. Saeki apparently fell unconscious while logged into *The World*. Although she is physically unharmed, she is mentally fatigued. There's fear she has undergone psychological shock."

Fierce stress could damage the heart and other important internal organs. In an extreme case, it could cause insufficient blood flow, killing the brain and other organs that were otherwise healthy. In essence, the patient could die from shock.

"It's from the stress I went through as an Epitaph User when Pi was killed," Reiko said. She looked puzzled as she glanced down at herself in that hospital smock. It seemed strange and unreal that she was able to peacefully sit atop that bed. There were no physical injuries. On the other hand, her mind had experienced a life-and-death battle. It wasn't unusual for soldiers to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) when they returned from battle.

"I saw Ovan."

Reiko's statement shocked both Ryo and Tomonari.

"He asked to see me and I complied. We met at a Lost Ground," Reiko sounded distant, as if she wasn't the one who had done this.

"What did you do with Ovan?" Ryo couldn't assault her with a rampage of questions like "Why did you go alone?" or "Why didn't you tell us?"

"He eviscerated me," Reiko grumbled, her eyes downcast. "He tore out all twenty of my nails, cut my fingers and toes off joint-by-joint and severed my arms and legs. He removed the flesh from my bones. He pulled out my internal organs and separated them, saying, 'These are your lungs, this is your stomach, and these are your

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intestines.' I could still feel the body parts, even after they had been severed from me—the pain never subsided. That monster asked me if I'd like him to quench my parched throat with the blood from my still beating heart after he tore it out of me.

"Ovan had asked how long I would remain human. That man and his accomplice tore out my eyes, cut off my ears, pulled out my tongue and skinned me alive. He slurped up the marrow in my spine and ate my brain with a spoon after cracking open my head. He ran his tongue across my soul, clinging onto the tasty bits. He thanked me for the feast and tossed all the leftovers into a garbage disposal. My senses became a jumbled mess, making it impossible to tell what was what. The last thing I remember was the smell of my blood coming from Ovan and his accomplice as if they had showered in it. That was all that was left. That might be why I'm still here," Reiko recalled, her voice monotonous like a robot's.

Ryo gulped as he remembered the video of Pi's severed head that Ovan had attached to his e-mail.

"He sent a disgusting photo like that to you? He's such a sick murderer." Reiko sniffed.

This conversation wasn't figurative. As an Epitaph User, Reiko had been mentally linked with her PC, Pi. As such, she truly knew what it felt like to be thrown into a blender.

"The most unforgivable part of all this was how he told me all about my dear brother right at the end." An outsider like Ovan knew more about Jun Banshouya than she did, even though she was the one who had adored him.

"Your brother...?"

"Jun Banshouya is Ms. Saeki's brother?"

This little fact was a shock to both Ryo and Tomonari.

Reiko gave them a brief rundown of her life. She told them about how she had lived together with her older brother for a while when she was younger. They were from different mothers. He was a top-notch engineer and she had greatly respected him when he was given a big project at CC Corp. Jun had vanished without a trace two years ago.

Reiko also explained how she had joined G.U. after getting scouted by CC Corp.

Yata and upper management had known about her relationship with Jun Banshouya. Reiko Saeki had become the Epitaph User, Pi, in order to find out the truth behind her brother's disappearance.

"Why didn't you tell us sooner?" Tomonari asked.

"Would you have told us all about the incident seven years ago that led to your desire to be a hero as Kuhn? The same goes for you, Misaki," Reiko retorted.

Ryo had fought for half a year without telling anyone about Shino. The deeper and more pure an emotion was, the worse the fear that no one could understand it grew. As a result, he had kept his silence. That secret resolve was the source for his magic. It was like he had made a vow to keep it a secret.

"No one can bury the emptiness in our hearts by sharing it with others." Dirtying these special feelings with another's sympathy

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would only bring about shame. By losing Jun, Reiko's emptiness had formed the Seventh Phase, The Avenger.

"Why did I tell you about my brother now? No, why did I keep him a secret until now? I myself don't know why I used to be so adamant about that," Reiko said and heaved a heavy sigh. After a moment's pause, the expression on her face changed dramatically.

"You don't need a sword to kill someone," Reiko Saeki said intellectually, more like the Reiko to whom Ryo and Tomonari had grown accustomed.

Reiko asked them to fill her in on what was going on. Between her visit to Sugar Mansion Sif Berg and the handful of hours she had been unconscious, Reiko had fallen out of the loop.

"Upper management has decided to terminate all services with *The World R:2*," Tomonari said. The news was incredibly unnerving for Ryo.

"Since when?" Reiko asked, accepting the unanticipated turn of events.

"Just now. They already posted an apology to the users on *The World's* main page. They've claimed that it's temporarily down while they work on some serious problems with the servers. I doubt we can log in anymore...."

They all screamed silently in the hospital that night.

"Are they going to destroy the servers?" Ryo asked.

This was the absolute worst-case scenario. CC Corp was getting ready to completely shut down *The World R:2*. Even if shutting down *The World* stopped the AIDA phenomenon, there was no guarantee

that doing so could save the players who had gone into comas. It meant forever losing the only sure way to save the Lost Ones.

"Upper management is at a loss after making that deal with Ovan and lapping up his AIDA," Reiko said as she reached out toward the nightstand next to her bed.

"Need something?"

"Where are my glasses?" Reiko asked Tomonari. Normally she didn't wear her glasses when she was wearing an M2D. She had fallen unconscious while logged in to *The World* before getting rushed to the hospital. "They're at work," she concluded in an annoyed whisper.

"I'll get them for you later."

"Thanks, but that isn't necessary," Reiko replied and got out of bed.

Dr. Kurogai was shocked by her behavior. He exclaimed, trying to stop her, "You shouldn't get up, Ms. Saeki! You need absolute rest for at least a week."

"You must be joking," Reiko shot back as she gave Dr. Kurogai a sidelong glance. "This isn't the time to admire my figure, now is it? C'mon, get my clothes."

Reiko was in nothing but a thin gown for inpatients as she demanded her charcoal gray suit be brought to her. Tomonari asked Dr. Kurogai where Reiko's clothes were and rushed out to find them. Reiko stood with her arms crossed. Ryo had to look away from her to avoid seeing her womanly silhouette through her thin gown.

"That trickster has grown quite bold after having loomed in the shadows for so long," said Reiko. "It shows he's getting anxious."

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"Ovan, anxious?"

"He said he was running out of time." Reiko would never forget how haggard Ovan's player sounded as he whined and sought soothing from Shino, who wasn't even there. But if that were the case, he would be all the more dangerous now. After all, a wolf's fangs grew sharper through starvation and solitude.

That beautiful, intellectual beast would sacrifice anything to obtain the fruit called "truth." He was not afraid of hurting others or of making people hate and fear him. Ovan had an incomparably strong will that allowed him to sacrifice himself in the name of truth.

The time was nigh.

"You cannot develop yourself by looking to others."

What was Ovan trying to tell Ryo in his e-mail? Or rather, what had Ryo forgotten?

"Seven years ago, I was hospitalized here," Ryo announced. He looked over to Dr. Kurogai.

"Yes?"

"Dr. Kurogai, did I ever meet you during that time?"

Dr. Kurogai looked like he was in his upper twenties or early thirties, so it seemed highly unlikely for him to have been working at this hospital seven years ago. Nonetheless, Ryo had mustered up a seed of conviction before asking that question.

"I was working as an intern here at that time," Dr. Kurogai said in answer to Ryo's earnest question. Ryo had been an inpatient at this hospital for an extended period of time seven years ago. Dr.

Kurogai had played with the young elementary school boy on several occasions when he was undergoing rehabilitation.

"Dr. Kurogai, are you with CC Corp?" Ryo asked darkly. Just how much did Dr. Kurogai know?

"Although most people don't know this, CC Corp actually runs this hospital. I am conducting research to cure the patients referred to as 'Lost Ones' who fell into comas playing *The World*. We are fighting against the mysterious AIDA virus from a neurological and psychological standpoint. I was working on Chigusa Kusaka's case because she might be linked to the cure for the Lost Ones."

Dr. Kurogai added after a moment, "I was still just an intern seven years ago, so I didn't know the full story. But now I know that *The World* is the direct cause for people falling into comatose states." It was his job was to heal these patients. That was his true mission in this hospital.

"How has your research been progressing?" Ryo asked. "Is there a possibility you can save Shino Nanao?"

After a short pause of silence, Dr. Kurogai shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

With the exception of the people who fell unconscious for a few minutes after getting trapped in an AIDA server, Endrance's player—Kaoru Ichinose—was the only Lost One to have regained conscious.

"I believe the Epitaph Users are the only ones capable of saving Ms. Nanao," Dr. Kurogai said, unable to hide his frustration as a doctor.

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"If you remember all that," Reiko said and placed a hand on Ryo's shoulders, "Misaki, you might have a fighting chance against that man."

"Ms. Saeki...?"

"You have a secret. It's a hidden truth even you aren't aware of."

"Does it have to do with my lost memories?" Ryo asked.

"You must learn the truth about yourself first and foremost. Then turn that knowledge into power," Reiko answered.

Ryo Misaki had traversed the border between life and death when he suffered from that paralytic disease seven years ago.

"No one knows what caused your illness," Dr. Kurogai said.

"Huh...?"

"From what I heard, your parents were told you had contracted a virus that created paralysis. That was even put on your medical chart. But in all honesty, no one in CC Corp's medical research team knew why you had fallen into a coma. The Lost Ones were saved by the hero Kite in *The World*."

"I was a Lost One?" Ryo croaked.

"We never did find a way to save the Lost Ones, which is why I'm still conducting research on it," Dr. Kurogai said.

I was a Lost One.

Ryo reflected on what his father had told him. Seven years ago, he had been addicted to an online game similar to *The World R:2*.

"Seven years ago, you were one of the six Lost Ones," Reiko told Ryo.

The stale pond of memories in Ryo's mind was growing clear again thanks to the light Reiko and Dr. Kurogai's words shed. Ryo had played *The World* back when he was in elementary school. That truth had been hidden under a pile of mud.

This is what I lost, Ryo thought as he stood dumbfounded.

He knew everything. When Haseo had lost to Ovan in the Inverted City Megin Fi, he had learned that his story wasn't over yet. His story was just a fragment of the ongoing saga that took place in *The World*.

Reiko told Ryo about her interaction with Ovan in the Sugar Mansion Sif Berg in great detail. She told him about the white room and everything she knew about Ovan. She also told him about her brother, Jun Banshouya, and her own personal life story.

Waves rocked Ryo's heart. Reiko told him the truth behind Ovan, as well as Aina, who lived in that white room. Aina was the young Shadow Warlock sitting in that rocking chair.

"She's Ovan's daughter?!" Ryo couldn't mask his surprise.

Ryo thought he remembered Zelkova mentioning there was a PC Ovan regarded as his daughter. But the way he had talked in front of Pi made it obvious that Aina's player was Ovan's player's daughter. To top it off, a sign had been carved on Aina.

"If we trust what Ovan said to be true, Aina would be the first Lost One in this AIDA phenomenon," Reiko stated. That also meant that Ovan had been doing everything within his power to save his comatose daughter. The Twilight Brigade, Ovan's first encounter

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with Haseo, the way he attacked Shino, betrayed everyone, crushed Haseo and decided to become a god—it was all to save Aina.

“Ovan is trying to use the power of his Avatar in his right arm to save his daughter after putting her in a coma with the AIDA in his left arm.” It was contradictory. Ryo’s mind became frazzled, making it impossible for him to finish his line of thought.

“That contradiction and the mystery it creates are linked to the truth behind Ovan. All of that man’s magic revolves around the girl in that rocking chair. It is born from the hidden truth. The only one who can uncover Ovan’s hidden secrets is Haseo. At least, that’s what I think,” Reiko said. She was entrusting everything with him.

“What?!”

“Your hidden truth.... The emptiness created by your lost memories from seven years ago might be able to create the power of ‘truth.’ Even Ovan doesn’t know about that power,” Reiko said.

Although that trickster had learned the facts of the situation from afar, he did not know the full truth. Ovan would have to enter Ryo’s heart, fully understand his story and then bring it to a close. He would have to steal the truth from Ryo like a thief in the night.

Ryo Misaki had lost some of his memories from seven years ago. Since he had forgotten the story from back then, his “black box” had been sealed shut tight. No one could have raided it yet.

“I don’t know if this will comfort you or not,” Dr. Kurogai said, “but none of the Lost Ones staying at our hospital have ever passed away.” That went for now as well as seven years ago.

“Shino....”

"She's fine, Misaki. Despite her condition, she doesn't smell of death," Reiko said as she looked Ryo in the eye.

Tomonari came running back into the room with Reiko's clothes in his arms.

THREE

Ryo, Reiko and Tomonari left the hospital and went directly to CC Corp's main building. A strong wind struck Ryo's face when he got out of the hybrid sedan. There was a humid sea breeze. This end of the large gulf district looked just like the orderly model the city planning committee had designed. The skyscraper that served as a landmark was none other than CyberConnect's Japanese headquarters.

"Welcome to the new main building," Reiko said.

The building had just recently finished construction. It was called "new" in reference to the "old" main building that had been destroyed in the fire two years ago. The old main building had been located elsewhere; it had already been torn down.

It was in the gray of morning, just before daybreak.

"There's quite the commotion," Reiko snorted as she looked up at the building. It was easy to tell what things were like inside the building going by the number of lights still on. Everyone from the higher ups to the grunt workers were in a frenzy over *The World R:2* getting shut down. Everyone in the administration department, especially the Game Masters and the development department, were

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in a panic. The support center's lines had been blown out. They had been the first to go.

All three of them entered the first floor lobby through the staff entrance.

"Whoa! That's the CyberConnect Museum!" Tomonari chirped cheerfully as he pointed to the museum.

They were greeted by holograms of *The World's* shopkeepers when they approached the reception desk. The lobby was filled with posters for other games CC Corp was making as well as various video clips. There was also a museum that displayed merchandise related to the games. It was open to anyone who made a reservation.

CC Corp had created a large number of online games aside from *The World*, using the enormous amount of money they had earned from the original *The World* as seed money. Aside from releasing more games, they also used that money to release novels, cartoons, movies, music, and online publicity. They had bought up various industries as well. It was growing ever larger as a comprehensive portal in the ubiquitous era. All of the CG acting companies were naturally affiliated with CC Corp. Part of CC Corp's success was linked with how they worked with fields that were treated as novelties when first introduced to the public.

"Is it a giant in the online world of entertainment?" Ryo whispered.

"I suppose," Reiko answered. This futuristic building looked like a monstrously large dinosaur.

"Does everyone in CC Corp work here?"

"The main faculty and administrative development teams work here. Sales operations, network facilities, and some of the research facilities are located elsewhere."

"You mean like that hospital?" Ryo asked. He took the guest pass Reiko handed over to him.

Ryo followed Reiko and Tomonari into the upward bound elevator after they passed through the automated door terminal. Once they got off the elevator, they had to go through two security gates.

"I'd heard about the tight security here, but it sure is annoying," Tomonari grumbled. Apparently this was his first time in the main building.

"All game companies are like this these days," Reiko replied.

They were admitted into an office room. The square room was about 215-square feet large. The front wall looked like a window, but the LCD curtains built into the glass were closed. There were only three desks. The desks faced each other in a triangle, making it impossible to discern office rank through seating order. Each desk had a computer and various other work-related objects, such as displays that had been left out. However, it looked like two of the desks had never been touched. The room seemed rather empty considering the lack of furniture for its size.

"This is my desk," Reiko said as she placed her hand on the chair in front of her.

"You mean this is Project G.U.'s room?"

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This quiet, lifeless office was where CC Corp came up with their countermeasures against the AIDA. Compared to the grandeur of the Serpent of Lore, the real thing seemed pathetic. Ryo was both shocked and terribly disappointed by the discrepancy.

“Surprised?”

“Is this my desk?” Tomonari asked. He was getting ready to sit in the empty chair before him.

“That’s Mr. Hino’s desk! But he hardly ever actually comes to the office.” Reiko then explained how Takumi’s contract made him more like a business partner than a normal employee. As such, he almost exclusively conducted work from his home.

“What? So Yata worked out of his home, too?”

Tomonari had conducted his part-time job out of his home in Kanazawa, so the idea of Yata working out of his home put the young man strangely at ease. He settled himself into the other open chair. His dream of working full-time at CC Corp had finally come true.

Reiko told Ryo to take a seat.

“I guess our work space is online, huh?” Ryo asked as he sat in Takumi’s seat. Everything needed to play *The World* was at his fingertips, including an M2D and a controller. The desktop was designed for work.

All three of them sat facing each other.

“This is the first time there’s been so many people in this room at once,” Reiko said. For the first time ever, G.U.’s project room in CC Corp’s main building was being used to the fullest. Reiko was

just about to pick up her glasses, which had been left on the side of her desk, when she looked at both the boys. "Did you go to the bathroom first?"

"Yes, Ms. Saeki," Ryo replied lightly. He and Tomonari put on their M2Ds.

Reiko booted the system. It looked like both Ryo and Tomonari's computers were already set up.

"I'll try to log into *The World*, even though it has been closed down."

"*The World's* main page just has an apology on it," Ryo said as he looked at it through his display. There was an announcement that the servers would be temporarily down while they underwent maintenance due to large-scale server trouble. The link to the official forum had been taken down. The large public forums were probably in a frenzy. If *The World R:2* reopened within a day, then there wouldn't be any problems. But if it continued for two or three days, it would create a real stir.

"We're with the system. We should have a special way to get in....," Tomonari started to say, but quickly realized that the login path meant for personnel had been closed down.

"Even personnel aren't allowed in the system during emergency maintenance, eh? This main page was poorly made, too." There were typos in the announcement. It looked like whoever had put it up was in a hurry.

"Did upper management declare it an emergency when they shut down all the services?"

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"What happened in *The World* while we were off at the hospital?" Both Ryo and Tomonari fell into deep thought.

Something strange was going on. Whatever it was, it was big enough to make CC Corp's upper management, which was as indecisive and slow moving as a dinosaur, quickly decide to destroy their servers.

"It's no good," Reiko grumbled as she continued to type up a storm. She had tried several ways to break in, but *The World* wasn't letting her log in using her authority as a supervisor for the game.

"Does that mean your account was frozen?"

"I doubt that. They haven't had enough time to be that thorough," Reiko said in answer to Tomonari's question.

Since the upper management had shut down *The World*, they weren't afraid of what G.U. might do next, unlike when they first dismissed Yata. Reiko continued working on it, but things didn't look good.

"Epitaph Users are just normal people if we can't log into *The World*," Tomonari groaned as he covered his head in his hands.

"What if Ovan shut down *The World*, not upper management?" Ryo asked, the idea just hitting him.

Reiko gasped at the thought. "That man just might..."

"It's an AIDA server!" Tomonari yelled, his voice cracking. This was just like when Ovan had made a mirror server in *The World*, which effectively shut out Moon Tree's @HOME to anyone not already there.

"You mean Ovan has taken over *The World*!?"

The upper management had just changed the main page and destroyed the various links so they could hide the real problem at hand from the normal players. Ryo, Reiko and Tomonari put their heads together and began brainstorming a way around this.

"If AIDA has rejected us, there's no logging into *The World*."

"Last time we used sign hacking to break into Moon Tree, but...."

"We can't do that if we can't log into *The World*." They couldn't take advantage of the signs from the real world.

The discussion was simmering down, but at the same time, they were running out of options. It was impossible to log in—it was the exact opposite of what had happened with the previous AIDA server, where no one could log out. Although they were safe in the real world, they were unable to get into *The World*, where the incident was taking stage. That made their situation all the more hopeless. The three fell silent as they thought of how to break free of this predicament.

"Oh...." Ryo suddenly remembered something. He left *The World's* homepage, which was a dead-end, and returned to the desktop. The mailing system linked to *The World* was still functioning. He set up his account and browsed through his mail addresses. Ryo selected one of the addresses and sent it a blank e-mail.

"What's up?" Tomonari asked Ryo.

Ryo received a response within less than a minute.

"Misaki, what are you doing?" Reiko asked.

"Reiko, try logging in again."

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"Why? I've already tried several times."

"It might work this time. I got in contact with someone still in the game. We're supposed to get invited in through the back door," Ryo said.

Both Reiko and Tomonari were puzzled by what Ryo said, but accessed *The World's* main page anyway. They gave a yelp in surprise.

Ryo had received a message from Zelkova, the former Guild Master of Moon Tree.

FOUR

There was a village surrounded by snow and forest. The log houses around the square were lined up roof to roof. The dimly lit storefronts had displays of silver and gold bells, colorful glass animals, wreaths made from fruit and vines, and cute ornaments up for sale. A finely knitted butterfly looked just like a miniature picture. There were exhibits of silverware and plates that went for thousands of GP. Stuffed knit dolls came with five and six pairs of shoes, making them seem somewhat materialistic.

"Jingle bells, jingle bells!"

Haseo could hear the sound of Christmas bells. The silhouette of a reindeer-drawn sleigh ran across the night sky. Nearly a hundred villagers were enjoying the festival in the marketplace.

"Isn't it summer?" Kuhn quipped, but no one responded to his joke. That went to show exactly how stunned the three were.

"So, where are we?" Pi asked. She was at a complete loss. She simply stood dumbfounded as she watched the scene unfold before her from atop a hill that overlooked the village. CC Corp hadn't made this town.

Haseo began walking down the hill.

"There isn't a Chaos Gate or a terminal here. It's an independent area, without entrances or exits," said Kuhn. The Propagation's Epitaph User could see the construction of the entire town without budging an inch.

They had never made a Christmas town like this. Where the heck was this server?

"Misaki, I mean Haseo, what did that e-mail from Zelkova say?"

"I don't know, but thanks to it we were able to log in."

They were a step closer to *The World* since they had managed to log in with their Epitaph-PCs.

"Someone rewrote the main page."

When they had re-accessed *The World's* main page, the previously missing log in button had reappeared. It had acknowledged all of their accounts and let them log in.

"You think Zelkova did it?" Kuhn asked doubtfully.

"Two things about this are surprising. First, that a player was able to tamper with *The World's* main page. The less surprising aspect of this is that Zelkova of Moon Tree was the culprit," Pi said, disgruntled.

Such tampering was possible with personal sites, sites for small companies or sites for public offices. But CC Corp was

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ruler of the network portals and used top-notch software. There was no way someone could tamper with the main page from the outside, no matter how computer-savvy he was. Plus it seemed unbelievable that the Guild Master from Moon Tree would do something like hacking.

"Maybe he did it from the inside?" Haseo suggested. He could have done it from inside the game, the same way Ovan used the AIDA to close off *The World* from the outside world. It would be all the more probable if Zelkova was able to connect with CC Corp's mainframe.

"You think someone in upper management is Zelkova? That he's been secretly playing *The World*?"

Pi began speculating over Kuhn's hypothesis. She seemed to have an idea who in upper management it might be. He had gone behind his colleagues' backs and secretly invited the members of G.U. back into the game.

"Whatever the case may be, Christmas is taking things too far."

"Sure is."

Although fascinated by the idea that Zelkova's player was part of CC Corp's upper management, it just didn't feel right to Pi or Haseo. If he was secretly playing the game, then his position as Guild Master of Moon Tree would have made him stand out too much. Then there was this design. Christmas—the day Christ was born. It was just too ironic if this festival was to celebrate Ovan's birth as a god.

A PC that had covered its face deep within a hood approached the three Epitaph Users once they climbed down the hill. It laughed,

"Ah-ha! Ah-ha! Ah-ha! Ah-ha! Ah-ha! Ah-ha! Ah-ha! Ah-ha! Ah-ha! Ah-ha!"

"What in the world?!" They chorused, shocked by the hooded man's broken laughter.

"What gives?" Kuhn asked, ill at ease.

Kuhn tried to catch a glance of the man's face through the hood. A moment later, Kuhn jumped back, startled. The man flipped back his hood. He didn't have a real face—it was all composed of ASCII art. Kuhn was utterly stunned.

"Are the PCs here...?"

Haseo took a closer look at the PCs that had gathered in the town square only to realize that they all looked strange. The bard in rags suffered from broken data. Another had three faces and six arms, like the evil Hindu Asura deities. One looked like the insect-man from Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, getting ready to cross the lands. There was a glamorous woman who was flat, so she looked like a line when seeing her from the side. Some were less complex, with nothing more than a wire frame. The worst of the bunch didn't even look like they were alive. There were some Haseo had thought were snowmen or poorly made ornaments until they started to move.

"They're modified PCs," Pi guessed. There were a bunch of people wandering around that fell into the same category as Ovan with his left arm enshrouded in a barrel-like cast. Some PCs had gaps while others had overlapping images. There was synthesis and propagation, along with simplification and glorification. The

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only keyword that could link all these PCs together was that they used "hacks."

This was a village of decadence, where established value and morality was rejected through shocking imagery.

"I've heard about this place before! This is where illegal hackers and cheaters go. It's the—" Kuhn burst out, but a blinding bright light suddenly flashed before them, cutting him short.

A tower of light suddenly appeared in the center of the town square. It was a crystal tree. The glass fir towered over the roofs. Its frozen branches stretched out as it absorbed the sparkling water. Within moments, its pine needles reached out for the night sky.

Translucent snow fell from the sky, which was filled with millions of stars that stretched across the horizon. Crystallized snow that looked like large droplets of frosted glass slowly drifted down to the ground.

"Whoa." Pi sighed like a little girl. The second the crystallized snow touched her shoulders, it made a dry sound as it shattered.

The aurora's veil fluttered and the LED illuminating lights decorating the rooftops glistened. The festival was putting on a magnificent show. Through the speakers they could hear a drunken old man perform a horrible rendition of "Silent Night."

"That looks good," Kuhn said as he looked at the booths. In front of the houses were small shops that sold sausages, chicken, roasted almonds and sunflower seeds.

"It smells nice," Pi whispered. It had a fragrant scent.

"Take some hot wine," offered someone in a reindeer costume. He used his hooves to hold up a tray covered with cups filled with warm wine. This was just that type of game. It was an event in the online game.

Neither Haseo nor anyone else was sure what to do, so the person in the reindeer costume removed his headpiece. From underneath the headpiece came a young boy's face with horns on the top of his head.

"Zelkova?!"

NET SLUM

"Welcome to the Net Slum! ♪" Zelkova exclaimed in his reindeer costume.

"The Net Slum?" Ryo was confused, but he thought he had heard the name somewhere before.

"It's part of *The World*, yet not part of *The World* at the same time. There's a bunch of places like that in this game."

"It's a nesting ground for illegal players!"

If it was the same Net Slum that was mentioned in the Banshouya Files, this was a legendary illegal area made by hackers back in *The World R:1* days. The Net Slum had survived even after the second version of the game came out.

"Did you take over *The World R:2*'s system and enlarge the server?" Pi felt like she was about to throw a fit. They were doing whatever the heck they wanted here. *The World* wasn't freeware that they could play with however they pleased!

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"Isn't it like stealing electricity from a power pole?"

"They jammed a floor between the first and second floors," Kuhn breathed, completely stunned.

There was a fierce look on Pi's face as she adjusted her glasses. She was wondering if she was capable of creating a server like this on her own. She thought it would be terribly difficult.

The horned youth simply smiled as he looked up at everyone.

Pi decided to ask Zelkova a different question. "Is this where Mr. Hino invited the hero Kite during the battle seven years ago?"

"Yep! Yata is famous amongst the residents here."

Zelkova's answer had confirmed Pi's suspicions. Zelkova already knew everything. He knew Yata's real name along with the incident that happened seven years ago and even about the Lost Ones. He probably knew everything Pi knew.

"What are you? You know far too much," Pi asked. Zelkova had already known about Project G.U. when they met for the very first time.

"Whoa!" A huge man walked up ponderously behind Kuhn as he wrestled to get his big body through the snow. It was Santa. It was Santa Claus in his bright red suit with a staff in one hand and a bag of presents tossed over his shoulder. Everyone had to arch their necks to see his face.

"Oh, if it isn't you! ^3^" he cried out. Santa pulled back his fur-covered hood, revealing a red lion head.

Everyone was stunned into silence. The PC dressed up as Santa was none other than the Guild Master of Kestrel, where Kuhn had once served as second-in-command.

"Gabi?!"

"And who are you again?" Haseo said mockingly before Gabi got the chance. Having lost his line, Gabi tilted his head to one side like a cat. It wouldn't surprise Haseo if two or three corpses came falling out of that bag of presents.

"Is Gabi of Kestrel a resident of the Net Slum, too?" Pi asked as she looked up at the red lion in a Santa costume.

Zelkova looked around at the festival and said, "This is in *The World*, yet not in *The World* at the same time. As such, residents don't have to obey the pre-existing framework. We have both PCs and NPCs here. Unlike in the public version of the game, there's no fence between the players and the system."

"What do you mean by NPCs?" Haseo asked and looked at the modified PC villagers singing around the crystal tree.

Zelkova had meant that here in the Net Slum there were characters who didn't have players. Players who paid for their subscription and their PC existed as equals with NPCs that were supposed to be nothing more than programs made by the system.

"There are also some BOTs that skilled hackers made for fun and set free in *The World*," Zelkova said before asking if they had ever heard of Vagrant AIs.

"They are artificial intelligence that lacked the specs to become the ultimate AI," Pi answered.

Harald Hoerwick had originally created *The World* as a system meant to create the ultimate AI. Before Aura was born, various experiments were conducted using the player's thought samples in



the pursuit of making the ultimate AI. That was how these failed creations came to be.

"If the ultimate AI is a higher-level being, then the Vagrant AI would be lower-leveled gods, demigods, fairies and monsters. I'm sure Harald viewed them as garbage since they could never become Aura. The system viewed these uncontrollable Vagrant AIs as dangerous and went crazy trying to destroy them. But some of them managed to survive anyway."

Even now, this game was creating new Vagrant AIs. *The World* was a genetics lab for intelligence.

"And the beast man? Gabi, what are you?" Ryo challenged the lion in a Santa Claus costume.

Gabi tilted his head to one side like a cat. He then spun his head around like an owl before it crumbled away into nothingness. It was like he was doing a vanishing act—his Santa outfit fluttered to the ground. Several miniature Gabis who looked like stuffed animals stood on the clothes laughing. The group of tiny Gabis suddenly started in surprise before they quickly ran off, scattering in every direction.

"What was that?" The Disney-like event left the Epitaph Users stunned.

"Gabi is the strongest person in *The World*," Zelkova said. "There's not a single player who could stand a chance against Gabi. Even the system couldn't put a belled collar around Gabi's neck. That ultimate creature took on the form of the king of the jungle: a lion."

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"Does that mean Gabi doesn't have a player?" The possibility had just struck Haseo.

"Who can say? I certainly don't know. After all, that isn't a problem here in the Net Slum." There was no difference between PCs and NPCs in the Net Slum. They were both sentient. If that was the rule here, then Haseo would just have to accept it.

Gabi's charisma helped him lead the largest guild in *The World*, with over 5,000 power-hungry players devoting their love to him. As such, *The World's* autonomy made him take on the form of that red lion. The reason behind it was practically a slogan for a game: Because it's *The World!* The game was unwavering in its self-affirmation.

"Kuhn, weren't you second-in-command at Kestrel once? When did Gabi become the Guild Master?" Haseo asked.

Kuhn answered vaguely, "When did Gabi show up again? No, maybe he was there from the start."

This wasn't a problem with Kuhn's flighty memory, but rather, that was just the type of person Gabi was. No matter how it came to be, *The World's* autonomy had brought the battle-loving guild, Kestrel, a king to serve as their figurehead.

"Have you ever heard anything about Gabi's player?"

"I'm not sure. I've heard a bunch of rumors about him, like he's an old man forced into retirement or that he's a zoologist traveling around the world, but...." Kuhn trailed off as he realized that he didn't know anything about Gabi but was talking as if he did.

"The king isn't the only one here. There are also cheaters who get bored of normal PCs and items, and hackers who get addicted to

the thrill of illegal gaming. There are some who are unsatisfied with playing normal roles and begin searching for things outside of the norm. They are idiots who love to stand out. There are also criminals who use cheat items to get abnormally strong or rich. In the opposite extreme, there are some imaginative players who forfeit their rights as users to be rocks on the ground or some sort of shapeless objects. Each and every one of them wants to become one with their own story here in *The World*. I will always acknowledge them as my neighbors. They're old friends, which goes for him as well," Zelkova said.

Several sleighs with Santas in them chased after shooting stars in the night sky. There was one strange silhouette in the sky. Was it supposed to be a flying carpet? It swiveled back and forth like a drunkard. Even after reindeer trampled it and sleighs ran over it, the magic carpet continued to laugh joyfully. "GAH HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!"

"Yata?!"

The Epitaph Users were struck speechless. It wasn't a carpet, but a piece of parchment paper. It was what had become of the priest-like Dance Macabre. He must have escaped from Ovan, not that he had ever belonged to Ovan to begin with.

"The Net Slum is such a wonderful place to be, people sometimes forget if they're playing a role or if someone is playing them. They can't tell if they're a PC or an NPC anymore," Zelkova stated, causing shivers to run up Haseo's spine.

Were there seriously people who couldn't tell if they were a PC or an NPC? There were NPCs who imaged their own background

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story in the real world, even though they were just programs. Likewise, there were players who thought they were characters in the online game.

"Yata!" Pi shouted with a boom.

The piece of parchment paper flattened out in surprise. Once Yata recomposed himself, he looked down at everyone as if he had just noticed them. He quickly flew down to Pi and rolled himself up before falling into her outstretched hand.

"He's an item?" His name had appeared in Pi's list of items she was carrying.

"It looks like that's the role Yata has chosen for himself. ♪"

He was like a genie in a lamp, passing through various players' hands as an item in *The World*, even if no one wanted that for him.

"Are there others like Yata?" Haseo asked.

Some of the residents in the Net Slum participating in this festival might have been players who had gone missing in the real world. They had been absorbed into *The World* without anyone ever noticing.

"I can't say we've never had cases like Yata's in the past. For example, there's Harald Hoerwick," Zelkova answered.

"Zelkova, you...," Kuhn said, caution filling his voice. Excluding the Epitaph Users, Zelkova had transcended the system far beyond what anyone else had achieved. Yet even so, the young Flick Reaper never dropped his smile.

"Zelkova already told us that it doesn't matter who or what you are in the Net Slum," Haseo said, cutting Kuhn short.

"But..."

"Zelkova is Zelkova. This is the Net Slum, a place both a part of *The World* and not at the same time. It makes sense that Ovan wasn't able to close this place down from the inside when he took over the system," Haseo continued. The Net Slum wasn't officially part of *The World*.

"If there's one rule for the residents here, it's that they don't deny each other's existence. They don't deny each other's existence, yet they reject their various worth as individuals. The underground always has paradoxes like that. But that's exactly why the Net Slum will always be part of *The World's* story. It will always be the last standing stronghold, capable of fighting against powers that are so strong they threaten to destroy the entire world."

It would not be easy to infect the Net Slum. The stronger the power, the truer that statement became. It had been that way seven years ago and it was that way now. After all, this village drifted on the border of the game world.

The young boy with antlers led the Epitaph Users to the village square. They slipped through a thousand villagers. It was like they had the lead role at the festival. Ash danced on the wind. Beer and wine poured down on them as if it were raining blessings on them.

Hub? Haseo thought he saw a Blade Brandier with roses decorating his hat amongst a group of dancing villagers. He turned to look back at the dancers as he continued to walk on. Then he thought he saw a Shadow Warlock with a crescent moon-shaped hat

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pass in front of him carrying a plate of food. The fir tree played music and the aurora sang.

A young lady came up to Haseo and offered him her hand. "Would you care to dance with me?"

"Atoli?!"

The smiling village girl wore a green outfit that fit in well with the Christmas theme—it was the Harvest Cleric, Atoli. Endrance and Sakubo walked up to them as well.

"What are you doing here?" Haseo asked.

It was the middle of the night in the real world. Putting Endrance aside since he was awake at night and asleep during the day anyway, it was surprising to see Atoli and Sakubo here.

"Zelkova asked us here," Atoli answered.

"I just couldn't sleep," Bo laughed with a giant roasted turkey leg in hand. With his heightened sense of taste allowing him to actually enjoy the Christmas hot wine, roasted almonds, and deer sausage, Sakubo was probably having the best time out of everyone.

"The Net Slum, eh? It has changed a lot since then, but it's still nostalgic. Don't you agree, Mia?" Endrance touched a snow man only to frown over how cold it felt.

"Kuhn, what do you see?" Haseo asked.

"The way the people in the Net Slum were constructed. Even though I can see it when I try, my lack of knowledge prevents me from comprehending it. I should have studied harder when I was at technical college." Kuhn smiled ruefully. Kuhn was able to see

beyond just texture graphics with his heightened sense of sight, allowing him to see the higher dimension of construction.

"Human eyesight is only able to capture the 3D world in 2D," Pi broke in. The parchment with Yata on it was still in her hands.

Human eyesight was akin to a camera and film. The eye lens gathered the visual information from the reflected light from the target object. The photoreceptor cells then turned the light received by the retina into electric neuro signals. After the signals were transformed from light to electricity, they passed through the optic nerve to the central nervous system. The visual cortex in the brain managed the electric signals and recreated an artificial 3D image based off of that information.

Humans had to drop a dimension in order to see as long as they existed within a 3D realm. That's just the way human sight worked.

"It's more like they're showing it to me, rather than me looking at it," Kuhn said.

Only Endrance's sense of touch and Atoli's sense of hearing were able to perceive the target exactly as it was in its 3D state. Endrance could trace his fingers across the object and Atoli could analyze how sound waves bounced off it.

"So our brains are tricking us." Haseo groaned. Their brains were recreating this world—this real image—as a perceived image.

"That's why people only see what they want to see," Pi replied.

"The world is nothing more than a fantasy to protect oneself with," Endrance said. As soon as he had finished talking, blindly

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bright fireworks went off.

The fireworks were like flowers blooming in the night sky. They then transformed into cherry blossoms that were in the peak of bloom. The Epitaph Users left the winter dance and blizzard of flower petals as they approached the crystal tree.

"Whoa!" Haseo gasped. A sign had been carved into the base of the tree.

"It's our back door," Zelkova said. This sign was a Chaos Gate for AIDA.

"Ovan's been here?"

"Although we were once friends, he now stands on the main stage. His value as a demon king declaring the end of the world is nothing more than a threat to the Net Slum," Zelkova answered.

Ovan had once been a resident of the Net Slum. That was why Yata, Gabi and Zelkova sounded like old friends when they spoke about one another.

Zelkova turned to face the Epitaph Users. He instructed them to hold hands and gather around the tree. They formed a ring around it. It was impossible to tell if the villagers' clamor was of screaming or cheering. This was the festival.

The sign carved on the crystal tree glowed red before they heard a voice declare, "Sign hacking!"

Zelkova shielded his eyes as the Epitaph Users were engulfed in a bright light indicating that they were about to be transported. Haseo noticed that the boy with antlers on the other side of the wall of light was looking up, as if indicating he should do the

same. Haseo followed the boy's gaze up. There wasn't a star at the top of the tree. Decorating the very top of the crystal tree was a relief of the Uroboros snake eating its own tail. It glistened as it spun around.

The Serpent of Lore. The ring was the source of beginnings. It represented the chaos from when everything was harmoniously mixed together as one, back before anything was conscious. The snake was a dragon. Haseo wondered if Zelkova's antlers were actually small dragon antlers. However, he and the other Epitaph Users were transported away before he could find out.

FIVE

In the center of an island that floated over a caldera lake was a Lost Ground with a cathedral. The surface of the water reflected the color of twilight. Solemn church music played in the background. The cathedral's flying buttresses stood like swords, giving the appearance that the structure had endured fierce winds for over a thousand years. It looked as if this place would never change throughout all eternity.

The viaduct jutting forth from the cathedral's entrance strangely came to a dead-end halfway across the lake. The pathway leading away from the cathedral failed to reach the other end of the cliff. Players always had to use the terminal to transport to and from the area. One of the restored parts of "The Epitaph of Twilight" said the following:

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Chapter One, Verse Two: She Turned Her Back to the Wheat Field

Apeiron, King of Lios, and Helba, Queen of Dakk, meet at the Navel of the Lake.

Before the threat of the cursed Waves, they must an alliance form.

Magi the Black and Bith the White (There were theories that it was actually the Black Guide, Bith and the White Guide, Fili), find the first shadowed one, the adventurer Saya.

Hear now the tale of how they met and set on their journey to find the Twilight Dragon.

The "Navel of the Lake" was a solemn nickname for Hulle Granz Cathedral. No one had found the fragments of the beginning of the story, covering the first verse in the first chapter. As such, it was said that this Lost Ground was the oldest location in the game. In all actuality, this Lost Ground was probably where the whole story began.

Δ HIDDEN FORBIDDEN HOLY GROUND. HULLE GRANZ CATHEDRAL

When the Epitaph Users reached the cathedral, they began searching Hulle Granz Cathedral anew.

"It doesn't look like it's been infected by AIDA yet," said Atoli, standing in the nave of the cathedral.

They couldn't find any black bubbles, which were secreted from the AIDA. The cathedral was calm and serene, as if the power

of the lake had kept the evil at bay.

"Those black bubbles are a sign of illegal hacking," Endrance said as he slid his fingers along the small fence that ran down the inner sanctuary. "Has *The World* flipped inside out now that the black bubbles have devoured almost everything?"

"That would mean we're the ones piercing holes in *The World* now, right?" Haseo asked nervously, his voice cracking.

"Just as we tried to steal a glance at the other side through the holes created by the black bubbles, AIDA may be peaking through holes shaped like us," Pi stated as she put on Tarvos with ease. AIDA was looking through holes created by their very existence.

"Is this really *The World*?" Atoli asked. Even she was doubtful. What was real and what was fake? Everything they needed to determine that had become twisted and useless.

"There's nothing outside either," Kuhn said as he and Sakubo entered the cathedral.

"There's a terminal, but it's nonfunctional," Bo added. The transport command wasn't working.

Haseo turned back around to face the chancel, which shone in the light. The sign on the altar glowed red. Zelkova had used sign hacking to transport them from the sign on the crystal tree in the Net Slum to the sign in the cathedral.

"This is where Shino was PKed," Atoli said as if she knew what Haseo was thinking. Tri-Edge—no, Ovan, had PKed her with the AIDA in his left shoulder.

"This is where Ovan fell into sin," Haseo agreed. His memories

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of the scene resurfaced.

When Project G.U. had recovered Shino's PC, it had been badly beaten up. That man and his fearsome three-fingered left arm had toyed with the gray-haired Harvest Cleric. That was when Ovan stole everything from Haseo and Shino, who had been waiting for him at the cathedral.

"I was in a coma temporarily despite undergoing the same experience as Shino. This was due to my power of resistance as a fully awoken Epitaph User. Reflecting back on it now, it really is miraculous I'm here."

"We need to come up with a strategy to fight Ovan," Kuhn urged in hopes of figuring something out.

"Could you be a little more specific?" Endrance asked back.

"Uh ... well...."

"It's easy to tell you're at a loss." Pi sniffed.

The World had lost all of its rules as an online game. The Epitaph Users were perplexed for they couldn't apply pre-existing battle strategies against Ovan. They couldn't use their Debug commands. They were forced to acknowledge that they had lost all of the special privileges they had enjoyed as members of the system.

"This is Ovan's game," Pi said. At this rate, they wouldn't even be able to leave the Lost Ground.

"Where is he?" Haseo fumed, his mind set on one thing.

Ovan had always been like this, ever since they first met. He was never around when Haseo needed him.

"I know where he is."

"Pi?"

Everyone stared at the pink Tribal Grappler. Pi said that Ovan was in the white room with a rocking chair. Haseo remembered catching a quick glimpse of that room in Avatar Space once.

"Supposedly it's inside the black box Harald left behind," Pi explained. Unfortunately, she had no idea how to get there.

"Were there any signs in the room?" Bo asked. If there were, they could sign hack their way in.

"There was a sign, but I don't know the area words. I don't know if there even are any area words for that place," Pi answered.

"I see." Bo sighed. He tried his best to think of another idea.

Haseo took a deep breath to calm his heart.

Look back on my memories, he thought. Haseo had succumbed to Ovan at the Inverted City Megin Fi. However, if his journey through his memories wasn't over yet....

"Because of the autonomy, Ovan is trying to create a story where he saves his daughter, Aina," Pi said.

Everyone knew Ovan's goals. The end was clear. Unfortunately, just knowing those facts didn't change how powerless they were before him. In order to devour Ovan's story and end the nightmare the AIDA wrought, they had to understand Ovan with all their hearts and souls. They could suck that trickster's blood and eat his flesh, but they needed to understand him with all five—no, six senses. They would never reach the truth if they didn't love him.

"Normally the scenario is all laid out for us, not that I ever really noticed until now. This is an online game that makes the player

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work for their story," Kuhn noted. He began thinking about Harald Hoerwick's creation anew.

"Ryo—er, Haseo," Atoli spoke up. "You've been creating a story about how you'll save Shino!" That story couldn't be found in the game's manual or strategy guide. It wasn't a story someone had prepared for him.

Haseo's story could be summarized as: Ovan and Shino's stories were just a part of Haseo's story.

The Twilight Brigade's Guild Master was always telling his guild members everyone helped make everyone else's stories. Haseo thought back on his past.

Ovan.... Back in the Twilight Brigade, what would he have done?

What was guiding you? When the darkness of intelligence hindered him, what shone the light to lead the way?

"Where there is a will, there is a way."

That was how Ovan had led Haseo. Because of that, Haseo was able to follow his will even now.

Haseo looked up at the godless altar. Actually, if *The World* had been completely transformed into an AIDA server and this was Ovan's game, then would he be...? Haseo reflected on the e-mail he had received from Ovan. There never was a God. He couldn't develop himself by looking to others. The moment he stepped outside the bounds of absolute truth, even if he was following the footprints of a god, he would die the moment he was born.

"This is where my story as Haseo began."

"It's also where *The World's* story began," Pi added.

"Are the stories guiding us?" The second Kuhn asked that question, Haseo turned sharply on his heel. He walked away, with the altar to his back.

"Where are you going?" Atoli called after him.

"The terminal doesn't work," Bo warned Haseo as he chased after him.

There was a terminal that was connected to the Chaos Gates in Root Towns at the edge of the bridge. However, Haseo doubted there would be any changes with it since the last time Bo checked it.

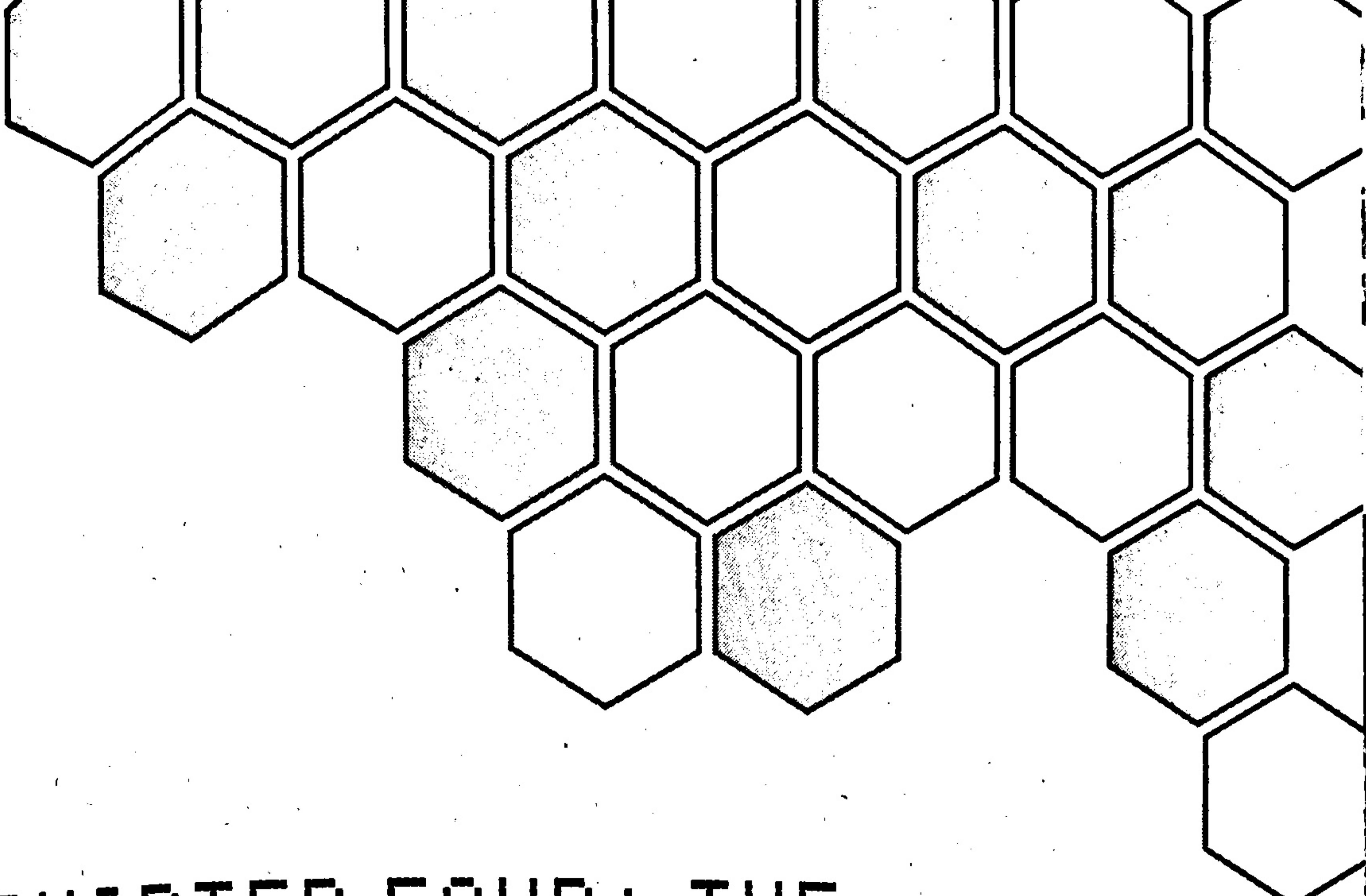
Haseo left the cathedral and walked right past the terminal. He stood before the end of the pathway. He made the game camera look down, only to see perpendicular cliffs climbing out of the lake hundreds of feet below him.

"Haseo?!" Pi didn't hesitate as she reached out for him.

Haseo overcame the fear in his chest as he took a step forward. Everyone was shocked. The map made it clear Haseo was definitely standing off the pathway, like some sort of bug one might expect to see in the early releases of a game. He was floating in mid-air over the lake.

It was a miracle. A wire frame bridge appeared from under Haseo's feet. The viaduct that only halfway crossed the lake had been extended to reach to the other end of the cliffs.

"There's a path!" Haseo and the other Epitaph Users gulped.



CHAPTER FOUR: THE SHADOWED ONE

ONE

A rail of light crossed the Lost Ground. Its sudden construction connected the dead end of Hulle Granz Cathedral's viaduct across the lake to the other side of the cliffs.

"There's a path!" the Epitaph Users gasped.

Haseo had crossed the invisible wall that indicated the end of an area. The Adept Rogue garbed in black had stepped onto empty air only to be supported by a path made from a wire frame.

"How...?" It took Atoli all she had just to ask that. How had Haseo known it was there? Where had he found the flag indicating how to break the mystery behind this Lost Ground?

"I had a hunch," Haseo answered.

Haseo'd had a gut feeling the bridge was there. It was *déjà vu*—it had whispered to him from between the thin wall separating his conscious mind from his subconscious mind. Or perhaps he had

done something like this once in his past. If it was from the old *The World R:1*, then it was like memories of a previous life resurfacing. Haseo stopped thinking about it.

Haseo looked straight ahead. The path continued for infinity, across the cliffs surrounding the lake and beyond the mountain ridge. He took another step forward toward the stone pathway leading to god, leaving the cathedral of beginnings behind him.

"Wait," Atoli said, trying to follow after Haseo, but unable to step onto the newly formed bridge.

Pi, Kuhn, Endrance and Sakubo were unable to follow after him. His friends couldn't cross beyond the bounds of the normal map.

"What gives?" Atoli cried as she rammed her PC against an invisible wall in an attempt to catch up with Haseo.

"It's finished," Endrance whispered.

"Huh...?"

"Your story has already reached its conclusion. You now share the diary of your life you used to keep to yourself with others. Kuhn's stupid dream of becoming like a comic book hero was crushed by Haseo. The great play of Pi's perverse feelings toward her brother reached a bitter end. Yata.... He became a stifling poster and put everything into his mental debut as a perverted entertainer. As for Bo, your Saku..., " Endrance said and looked at Sakubo. Bo didn't remember anything about his alternate personality that portrayed itself as his big sister, Saku. The elegant Blade Brandier looked blankly up at the sky.

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"Your story about Saku was incorporated into my own. Our stories have merged. And I've reached my happy ending since I have been reunited with my Mia. That's all thanks to Haseo being a busybody. But Haseo lost pathetically to Ovan," Endrance said. He concluded that the seven Epitaph Users' stories were just side stories, which had been gathered together by the main story centering around Ovan.

"Are you saying we lost the power to make our own stories in *The World*?" Kuhn wailed.

At the place of all beginnings, the Epitaph Users looked back on the paths they had taken—they knew it to be true. Their stories had either hit their conclusions or been devoured by another story. One way or another, their stories had reached an end.

"What use is there for a manuscript that's complete? The story is over once all the materials run dry. It's over once everything gets fulfilled," Endrance said cynically.

"No," Pi contradicted as she looked at the Adept Rogue in black and the path he stood upon. "Haseo still has to journey through his lost memories."

"In that case, this side-story is a path that will lead him to the main story arc: Ovan. As long as those two never forget about each other, there will always be a path connecting them," Endrance said.

"A side story, eh?" Haseo repeated. He oriented himself with this new path and looked back at the surprisingly talkative Endrance. Haseo gave him a grin—it was his invincible smile as the Terror of Death. Endrance seemed a little surprised by Haseo's piercing eyes as he shuffled back.

"I guess that my 'side story' will just have to take over his main story then!" Haseo said.

Haseo looked over at Kuhn. He asked The Propagation's Epitaph User where this new path would take him. What did Kuhn see with his keen eyes?

Kuhn squinted his one emerald green eye and saw miles down the straight path that stretched out before them.

"The path continues forever. It crosses lakes, goes over the Six Ringing Peaks of Al Fadel and stretches beyond the wastelands. It continues on forever, in a straight path," Kuhn answered. It was like he was a bird, seeing everything around the world as he flew.

"What do you see at the end?"

"Your back, Haseo."

"What?!"

"While on this path, walking away is the same as walking closer. That's all I understand. Just because I can see it doesn't mean I understand it," Kuhn said with a shrug.

"I guess this is no normal path," Haseo laughed. He stretched his arm out across the invisible wall toward Pi.

"Yeah?"

"I might be able to carry him." Haseo instructed Pi to hand over the piece of parchment paper. Since Yata had been turned into an item in *The World*, Pi was able to gift him to Haseo using the normal commands. Yata appeared in Haseo's list of items.

"Ooh!" Kuhn sounded impressed.

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"Is he my Black Guide or my White Guide? Well, journeys are all about the company you keep."

"Haseo...."

"Thank you, Reiko. Well, I'd better be off."

Haseo rolled up Yata, who laughed loudly, "GAH HA HA HA!" like a comic book character. He held the rolled up parchment like a diploma and turned his back to everyone.

"Haseo!" the young Harvest Cleric called out. The Adept Rogue in black glanced back at her.

"I'll be waiting for you here," Atoli said.

"Haseo!" Sakubo cried.

"You have a place to come back to," Endrance told him.

Everyone felt the same. As long as there were players in *The World* and the festival continued in the Net Slum, this borderline MMORPG would survive. It would be here as long as people cared for others. But now Ovan was trying to make the black box his. His beastlike mentality was devouring Harald's archetype. It would be disastrous if he completed his adventure for human knowledge in *The World*.

While on this path, walking away is the same as walking closer. Haseo held his friend's words dear in his heart.

"Shino...." Would her smiling face greet him at the end of this path? Haseo was certain that this would be his final journey as he set forth on his own two feet.

TWO

Haseo turned his back to the wheat field of happiness, just like the main character, Saya, the first shadowed one, from "The Epitaph of Twilight."

The mountain ridge looked like a scaly back. Taranis, God of the Sun, raced in his golden chariot. This was the great dragon Gwydion's lair. When Gwydion's head disappeared in the Western horizon, the tip of his tail in the Eastern sky would sweep away the dusk on the night's shroud. He was a massive dragon. Gwydion would lie on his stomach over a mountain ridge when it was time for Owain, the God of the Moon and Night, to take his turn lighting the world. The dragon cooled his body in the water veins as he slept. He would wait there faithfully until his master called for him the next morning.

At the end of the battle against the gods, the human's Crest Gun seared away all of the gods in Heaven. Taranis, the God of the Sun, was no exception. Even after he lost his master, Gwydion continued to wait for his return.

The humans' hubris grew in their victory. They wanted to make the sun move on their own accord, so they tethered Gwydion to the golden chariot and cracked their whips. Even so, the proud dragon stubbornly refused to move an inch. Gwydion grew thin and haggard as he waited for his master without eating or drinking. Eventually, all that remained were his bones.

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© HIDDEN FORBIDDEN DRAGONBEIN, BRIONA GWYDION THE DRAGONBEIN RANGE

Haseo was walking through the Lost Ground of Dragonbein Range. It was said to be the legendary lost land of Briona Gwydion. The area was bleak, like a mountain range on Mars. The infinitely long path was like a bridge as it crossed over the valleys between mountain ridge-to-mountain ridge and peak-to-peak. The path was akin to an animal's spine. The spine was considerably larger than any whale, so it truly had to belong to the mythical dragon.

"A sun dragon, eh?" Haseo asked as he wondered how long he had been walking.

Once Haseo had followed the path out of the Navel of the Lake in Hulle Granz Cathedral, he had appeared in an endless wasteland. When he turned around, he could no longer see his friends. No matter how far he walked, all he was greeted with was a dry wind. There weren't any objects of importance to help him keep his bearings, making him lose his sense of direction.

He had been walking like this for three days and two nights. Actually, it might have been seven days and seven nights. In fact, three days and seven nights didn't sound too far off either.

Ryo's synchronization with his Epitaph-PC had been growing stronger. Ryo has Haseo—there was no display or controller anymore. He had lost all feeling of his real body a good while back. It might have been caused by the AIDA server.

Once Haseo finally left the wasteland, he came to a mountain range. He wondered how many ridges he had crossed. How many valleys had he gone through? It seemed time was of little meaning here.

Yata fluttered around Haseo, dancing lightly like a kite. He was certainly enjoying the journey! Haseo gave a faint, forced smile. The Prophet was ecstatic as he sang praise to *The World*. The Fragments of "The Epitaph" told the story of the shadowed girl Saya as follows:

*"As she turns her back to the wheat field ravaged by the Waves,
the girl with a shadow's whisper can be heard:*

'Without a doubt, I shall return.'

But the girl didn't know

The truth awaiting her at journey's end.

Her land shall be lost for all eternity."

"Don't jinx us," Haseo grumbled as he shooed the parchment paper away as if it were a mosquito.

Yata had become one with *The World*. Takumi had completely cut all ties with his life in the real world. That was the form his love for Aura took. Haseo thought back on what Zelkova had told him in the Net Slum. Yata could no longer tell if he was a PC or an NPC. He had adopted a form where that no longer mattered.

"Do you think there's any meaning behind us walking over these dragon bones for so long?" Haseo asked The Prophet.



"What about meanings changing from person to person? Oh, now I see," he answered.

The Prophet, Yata, was eccentric as he jested over absolutely everything. Haseo just had to deal with it. After all, he hadn't expected a reasonable answer out of Yata when he had asked the question. Yata was behaving as a prophet, so his answers were always roundabout and hard to comprehend.

When Haseo got angry at Yata for acting self-important, he explained that the riddles were to test his dedication. His prophecies were to help point Haseo in the right direction, but Haseo would still have to do the work and search for the answers himself. The answers were more like questions directed at him. If Yata phrased the prophecy in simple wording, it would lose its significance and stop being a prophecy. At least, that was the lengthy know-it-all explanation Yata slammed Haseo with.

Whenever Yata finished a prophecy, he would always add the warning, "*The World* varies from person to person. You are responsible for your own actions."

Yata sounded like a critic. In short, Yata was the ideal onlooker in *The World*. That was the ever-intelligent Takumi's disposition. He was true to his own beliefs in his own way. It wasn't as if he was a jerk who hated others and liked to laugh at them.

Anyone who felt sorry for Yata because he lost the ability to differentiate the real world from the game was just trying to laugh at him. Or perhaps they weren't interested in his values. After all, the Epitaph-PC Yata, was *laughing*.

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No matter what the case may be, the prophetic parchment paper was the only person Haseo could talk to. Haseo was patient with the guy as they chatted.

"If there was a picture of me walking down Briona Gwydion the Dragonbein Ridge, what do you think its title would be?" Haseo asked, rephrasing the question. It was less stressful when he asked questions Yata could answer in only a few words.

Yata twisted and turned in thought. He looked like a cartoon character when he suddenly popped flat open and answered, "*The Trial?*"

Walking along Gwydion's corpse was a trial. Crossing Briona Gwydion the Dragonbein Ridge was a trial to see the sun-like god. This path was bound to lead Haseo to the focal point behind Ovan's story.

When Haseo reached the top of a ridge, he came to a stop. There was a girl Harvest Cleric in green waiting for him on this never-ending path made from a dragon's spine.

"Atoli...?" What was Atoli doing here when she was supposed to be waiting for him at Hulle Granz Cathedral? Haseo found this suspicious. The only path was the one leading to her, so he had no choice but to approach her.

"It's only polite to listen to everything someone has to say, you know."

Atoli sounded like one of those people who rang doorbells on Sunday trying to recruit for something or other.

Haseo came to a dead halt. She had said that on the first day Haseo had seen Ovan in half a year. Atoli, who looked just like

Shino, had stopped the PKK, the Terror of Death, by the fountain in Mac Anu. Sakaki had been next to her.

Atoli and Sakaki dumped their opinions of justice and righteousness on everyone. All they cared about was affirming that they were right. They contradicted others' beliefs to make themselves feel good. They never stopped to consider what other people might be going through. Haseo had exploded at the high-and-mighty hypocrites from Moon Tree. He had forced Atoli to retreat by skewing her with as many sharp words as a porcupine had needles.

"Both you and I are spending our time together here in The World."

That was at another time. Atoli had invited Haseo to a field saying she would help him level up. No matter what Atoli did, it only served to irritate Haseo since she had the same face as Shino.

"Have you ever met anyone here in The World who changed your whole way of life?"

"Do you like to beat people?"

"When you spend all your time showing off your power beating up people, how can you meet anyone?"

Everything she said drove down the PKK, the Terror of Death. Haseo had given up everything in the real world to save the comatose Shino, so Atoli's words had been hurtful. It felt like he was at a school debate and Atoli was pushing for her self-centered philosophy. Her off-beat argument was tasteless like stale bread. There was no way it could heal the emptiness in Haseo after he had spent half a year crawling in despair over Shino's loss.

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"Just because it's an online game doesn't mean you should forget about kindness and gratitude toward others."

Atoli had said the same thing as Shino when she had gifted Haseo with flowers, just as Shino had. The differences between Atoli and Shino only annoyed Haseo more when she acted like Shino. That annoyance grew into uncontrollable rage.

"Are you STUPID?"

The PKK, the Terror of Death, had to believe in the existence of Tri-Edge, a PKer no one had ever seen. No one would believe him if he announced Shino had fallen into a coma because of an online game and he lacked the evidence to prove it. Tri-Edge was a monster that resided within *The World*. This online game had to be a terrifying world with creatures capable of putting its players into a coma. As such, he had to berate and ignore all of the callous players who belittled him. If he didn't, Haseo would have faltered from his path.

Gratitude and kindness were what mattered. Those were the indisputable words of common knowledge that Atoli and her Moon Tree kept promoting. That served as an enemy standing before him. He needed to put all of his might into defeating it if he was to save the comatose Shino.

"Why should I be nice to you?"

Ryo adorned the persona mask of the PKK, the Terror of Death, Haseo.

Haseo was jolted out of his musings by Yata's loud, crude laughter. Atoli had vanished from the pathway.

"Was it an illusion?" Ryo asked himself. He felt horrible after tracing back over such bitter memories. That was a part of his past that would never disappear, even if he tried to turn his back on it.

"I ignored Atoli and treated her as if she didn't know a thing. I judged her unjustly, just as she judged me."

Haseo had slashed others away with the blade of rejection whenever they hurt him. After all, he was the most miserable person in the entire world. In doing that, he had nearly become the exact type of person Shino hated most.

"It hurts." Haseo walked passed where Atoli had been standing. His inner wounds felt as though shame was being grinded into them. He began walking once more.

Haseo crossed over a V-shaped canyon before Gwydion's path reached its next peak. Waiting for him there was a Blade Brandier wearing a hat decorated with roses.

"Endrance," Haseo whispered. Before he had a chance to run up to the man, Endrance's cold eyes pierced through Haseo's mind.

The dice of fate were tossed that day. After Ryo had leveled Haseo up to Level 133, he was transformed into a Level I weakling. It was the June of loss. His mask as the PKK, the Terror of Death, had been broken. He was forced to tremble in fear before random PKers in the fields. He was filled with loneliness and helplessness after seeing his world get shattered, both in the real world and online. The impatience he felt turned into a mountain as each day passed and he still hadn't saved Shino. Ryo was just a high schooler, so the debt he felt he owed Shino was a heavy burden on his shoulders.

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"You have no power."

That was what Endrance, who used an Avatar, the very symbol of power, had told Haseo at the Demon Palace Arena. Haseo had felt his soul scream out. The tip of Macha's blade had engraved pain into Haseo as it carved into him. But the pain he felt had filled him with ecstasy. The Adept Rogue clad in black had twisted his mouth into an evil grin. Ryo's mind had resided within Haseo.

That was when his mind and his PC had surpassed the bounds of the controller and M2D—their synchronization was lightning fast. It was Endrance's turn to twist his face in pain. It was the first time Endrance, the deliverer of pain, had experienced it for himself. And here he was supposed to have been invincible at this arena in *The World*.

That pain was power. Haseo had lifted his Avatar up to the crimson heavens. It was as if he were lifting his symbolic death scythe to the emptiness in his heart. He had been overjoyed by the arrival of this new irregular power that linked player and PC together. He had believed this power could save Shino.

Haseo had the look of a madman as he held Skeith over his head. Endrance's red blood had resembled red rose petals splattered across the arena.



Once again, Yata's laughter made Haseo snap back to reality. His soul felt like it was in a cold sweat. He was hit with a wave of fatigue.

Haseo had learned of his PC's fate after he first came in contact with CC Corp's Project G.U. Haseo had challenged Endrance, an Epitaph User and AIDA-PC, to a fight in order to force his Avatar to awaken and become a true Epitaph User.

"Those were my memories." Whenever one of Haseo's friends appeared on the path in Briona Gwydion the Dragonbein Ridge, they showed him some of his memories.

He had spent half a year as the PKK, the Terror of Death. At the end of that chaotic path, he had awoken to his Avatar. Haseo was delighted over his new power. With it, he had crushed the nightmarish Endrance along with the guy's beloved AIDA cat.

Haseo had been drunk with excitement over his fate. He told himself that he was the only one in the world capable of saving Shino. He and his Avatar were the only ones who could save her. He thought he was different from everyone else. That was how he had become drunk with power.

"But even after obtaining the Avatar, I was still powerless." He defeated Azure Kite, whom he had believed to be Tri-Edge. Yet that did not save Shino. In reality, all Haseo had obtained was the knowledge that he was an Epitaph User. True power was....

Haseo stepped over where he and Endrance of the past had been—he continued on his path along Gwydion. When he reached the next peak, there was a Tribal Grappler in spiked high-heels standing with her back turned to him.

"Misaki...."

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Pi turned to face him and adjusted the bridge of her glasses. Pi had been the first person he had met from Project G.U. both in real life and online. Reiko understood the solitude the boy had felt for these past six months. She took in all of his selfish behavior and rude insults as she gave Ryo a big hug. Reiko had forgiven him.

After Reiko had shown Ryo a picture of Chigusa Kusaka, he had realized that he needed to be kind to her. Reiko had been so kind to him, despite the fact that she carried a heavy weight in her heart because of her brother's disappearance.

"I'm sorry." When Haseo said that, Pi disappeared from the path on the ridge as if she were just an illusion. New possibilities were added to Haseo's destiny once he was able to say those two little words.

Gwydion's path crossed over hundreds of mountains. The path at the next peak was split into a fork. Standing at the top of the peak was a Shadow Warlock in a crescent-shaped hat.

"Excuse me."

It was Bo. Bo had liked Haseo, even though Haseo had rejected everything in *The World* in his quest for power.

"Will you join Canard?"

"You helped me, right? You could help lots more people like me...." Human feelings could only be born through sharing one's life with another.

Haseo probably could have kept things simple if he had rejected any who failed to understand Shino. However, doing so only created the monster called the Terror of Death, who constantly sought confirmation in his actions. Did he seriously lack the time to

hang out with Bo? Bo was peacefully playing the online game, so he should still be able to save Shino even if he didn't reject Bo.

Shino would scold me if I did otherwise. Haseo hadn't forgotten Bo's smiling face and joyous laughter. That was probably the first time he had shared happiness with another. Back when Haseo was in the Twilight Brigade, Shino had always been giving him her happiness.

It was okay. Haseo's story took a dramatic turn because he responded to Bo's feelings. He hadn't changed. He hadn't matured. He didn't need any beautiful miracles. Haseo had regained something he had lost. He had remembered what type of person he used to be. He had received the angelic Sakubo's blessings. His words had changed the way the wind blew against him on his journey for truth.

Briona Gwydion the Dragonbein Ridge was without end. When Haseo scaled the snow-covered mountain, a blue-haired Lord Partizan holding a lance stood waiting for him. He looked like Don Quixote.

"I'm a pathetic 24-year-old who hasn't accomplished anything."

Tomonari Kasumi had been one of the Lost Ones seven years ago. He had desired to become a hero, but wound up playing the role of a character in distress with Sieg. After that, he lost confidence in himself and even ended up losing his girlfriend. He smoldered in the season of darkness in his hometown as he dreamt for naught but working for CC Corp full-time.

Kuhn had lifted his lance in defiance of everything he had lost. That was what all Epitaph Users did, more or less. They each held

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a hole in their hearts. Their power reflected the emptiness in their souls, which allowed them to awaken to their Avatars.

Their hearts became one. They struck a chord with each other, binding Ryo and Tomonari tightly. That's how Haseo was able to offer Kuhn a helping hand after the young man had yielded to Ovan and gotten infected with AIDA.

"I swear I'll never abandon you, just like you never abandoned me!" With those words, the illusion of Kuhn that was standing before Haseo on the ridge vanished. The only ones left on Briona Gwydion the Dragonbein Ridge were Haseo and Yata.

No, that wasn't right. The Epitaph Users hearts became one as they grew to understand each other. They were forcing open the doors to *The World* that had sunk beneath the mud. They had walked through their stories, pulling each other along.

What was making him stand upon Gwydion's path of truth? Haseo called out inside his mind. Even if the entire world failed to acknowledge him, turned against him or demanded things from him, it didn't matter. "Not as long as I'm here."

The power to tell his story resided within himself.

Ovan.... He had claimed he would become a god. That was how he expressed himself as he tried to bring his own story to a close. It was the shape of his resolve and determination. The side stories had been devoured by his main story arc.

Haseo continued to walk along Dragonbein Ridge toward the never-ending horizon. He walked forward. There weren't many side-stories left. Haseo already knew the truth behind the majority of

those stories. But just knowing wasn't enough. He still didn't stand a chance against that beast of intellect. He needed his heart to become one with Ovan's, just as it had when he had fought with his Avatar against his Epitaph User friends.

While on this path, walking away is the same as walking closer. It was like he was following a Möbius band.

*I need to speak with the me of seven years ago. Speaking with his past self should have been impossible, but this was *The World*.*



Once every hundred years, a celestial nymph flew down from the heavens onto a large, rocky mountain. Her celestial robe gently brushed against the rocky surface. It was said that it took nearly an eternity for her to wear away at the rocky surface with her robes. It was impossible to count the years it took to completely erode away.

Haseo felt as if he had been walking for an eternity. His footsteps had eroded the land, making the path lay flat against the horizon that continued into infinity. A giant dragon's skull stood at the bottom of a rainbow.

Gwydion's skeleton was in an eternal slumber, its chin resting on a platform-shaped ridge. Its long jaw jutted out into the ocean. The rust-colored sky contrasted against the stormy seas. The spray from the ocean continually washed what remained of the dragon's beard. Haseo was at a loss for words as he stared at the picturesque

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scenery encompassed by the vicious storm. It was like his lips had turned into solid stone.

All conversation had come to a halt. Yata had been Haseo's companion on this impossibly long yet incredibly short journey that had proven to be indescribably empty.

Haseo mustered his courage as he began walking toward the dragon's jaw. Soon he would be at the end of the world. Although he considered himself almost there, it looked like the dragon's head was about the size of a peninsula. It was said that when Gwydion's head hung in the western sky, his tail was just hitting the eastern sky. Haseo had been rushing along a path that covered over half the world. His body was wracked by a thirst no water could quench.

After a while, another object that made the gears in Haseo's head start turning appeared. It looked to be a PC. Someone had collapsed on the side of the path and something else had gathered around it. The creatures picking on the PC were probably just black crows. That would make the PC a gray-colored corpse.

Haseo's eyes suddenly popped open. A commotion erupted, disturbing the world that had been like a serene garden carpeted in sand just moments ago. Those weren't crows. Monkeys had gathered around the PC—it was a herd of bug-eyed prosimians. A bright flash of lightning raced across Haseo's mind. They were the same prosimians that Ovan took with him everywhere. They were trying to eat the corpse's flesh.

Haseo screamed. The primordial hate he felt toward them was so strong he couldn't help but scream out as he materialized his

Avatar and wildly attacked the creatures. The prosimians, which were the size of large rats, screeched as they ran away.

The dead PC was garbed in black armor. He was clutching onto the dual blades fixed upon his gauntlets. It was a common weapon in fantasy worlds, based off the Indian Pata sword or Jamadhar. At first glance, he looked like an assassin. He was probably a Twin Blade. The face peering through the scarf and bandanna was that of a young man about Haseo's age.

Haseo's petrified mind began to break free from the stone as words connected to one another.

This is the journey down Haseo's memories.

This is the journey down Haseo's past.

Who was this Twin Blade who lived in Haseo's memories—the Gwydion Path? Why had Ovan's familiars—the prosimians—gathered around this boy clad in black?

What had the trickster discovered? No, what was he trying to keep hidden?

"I am always with you," a baboon said as it appeared before Haseo. It was an extremely strange, oversized monkey. Its hands had grabbed onto several of the prosimians. He tore open their heads and happily gnawed on them as if they were dried cuttlefish.

"I am difficult for you to endure and hard to accept, but we are inseparable. What is my name?" the giant monkey asked Haseo.

It was a riddle. It was a typical event in an RPG.

"The Epitaph of Twilight'...?" Yata whispered to Haseo.

The prophet inside the parchment paper danced gleefully in

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the sky, excited to see a reenactment of "The Epitaph of Twilight" in the Lost Ground of Briona Gwydion the Dragonbein Range. He began reciting one of the Fragments of "The Epitaph."

"Across Dragonbein Range

The party meets a monkey with the power of words.

The monkey asks of them:

'I am always with you.'"

The Prophet began to rattle on:

"THE ONLY TWO REMAINING ENEMIES WERE CUBIA AND THE FINAL EIGHTH PHASE, CORBENIK. HOW IN THE WORLD WOULD THEY FIGHT BOTH? IN THE MIDST OF TIME RUNNING OUT, KITE SCRAMBLED TO FIND A SOLUTION. FINALLY, HE FOUND THE REMAINDER OF HARALD'S CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE NOW-LIBERATED AURA IN THE BACK OF A DUNGEON OF AN ERODED AREA.

"KITE HAD LEARNED THE TRUTH OF THE WORLD. AURA WAS THE DREAM CHILD OF HARALD AND EMMA WIELANT. THE BRACELET AND CUBIA WERE OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE SAME COIN. CUBIA WAS THE ANTI-EXISTENCE OF THE BRACELET. IN ORDER TO DEFEAT

CUBIA, THE BRACELET WOULD HAVE TO BE ABANDONED. HOWEVER, IF THE BRACELET WAS ABANDONED, ALL COUNTERMEASURES AGAINST MORGANNA WOULD BE LOST.

“FACING THE FINAL BATTLE WITH CUBIA, KITE ASKED FOR BLACKROSE’S HELP. SHE HAD CONTINUED TO SUPPORT HIM AND CHOSE TO DESTROY THE BRACELET SO THAT CUBIA WOULD SO BE DESTROYED. KITE WAS CONVINCED THAT AURA HAD THE POWER TO DESTROY THE CURSED WAVES, MORGANNA. THE WORD ‘TWILIGHT’ FROM ‘THE EPITAPH OF TWILIGHT’ MEANT DUSK, BUT IT ALSO REFERRED TO DAWN. IF THIS POEM MEANT NOT DUSK, BUT DAWN, THEN AURA WOULD HAVE TO BRING LIGHT TO *THE WORLD*.”

Kite and his friends had challenged the Eighth Phase, Corbenik, to a fight.

It could bring destruction and salvation. The bracelet was just like an Avatar. It must have been hard for the *hero* Kite to *endure* and *accept* wielding the bracelet since it used the illegal ability Data Drain.

“*What is my name?*” The baboon repeated the riddle. It was something that was always with him.

Haseo reflected back on his journey and smiled. The riddle had made itself self-evident to Haseo after his journey from the

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Navel of the Lake to the far reaches of Dragonbein Ridge.

The answer was power. Both Kite and Haseo could be either saved or destroyed by their power. There was always only one answer, but that answer varied from person to person. Therefore there were as many correct answers as there were people.

Haseo studied himself anew. He was an Adept Rogue in black armor. He was a silver-haired monster feared as the Terror of Death. He was at level 133 and PKed any vermin who got underfoot. He had denied their existence as well as this world's existence. By denying such things, he had maintained a dangerous grasp on the reality encompassing Shino and *The World*. It had been hard for him to endure, but the two outlooks were inseparable.

Haseo shut his eyes tight as he faced his childish and ghastly memories of the past. He wished he could turn his back on the side-story of his life.

Th-thump! His entire soul was pulsating. He had known the answer for a long time. It was so terribly difficult to accept the answer he knew through-and-through.

A shadow.... Pain lanced through him. The pain in his heart was his power. It was a visitor from the other side, projected from the border between his conscious and subconscious mind. A third eye appeared within the darkness.

Come, a voice nearby said.

Come on!

It was closer this time. The pulse was knocking on the door to Haseo's mind.

I'm right here! People could be born anew countless times. The spring of memories became clear, making the dirt on the bottom visible.

"SKEITH!"

The answer of truth was like a magic spell. His inner power germinated and exploded. The Ryo of now and the Ryo of the past—as long as he didn't forget about them, they existed on an infinite horizontal plane. Eventually they would run into each other, for they were inseparable parts of himself.

"I am...."

A white giant stood before Haseo on Gwydion's Path. The humanoid creature clutched onto a cross-shaped staff garnished with a halo. It was the illegal monster from seven years ago that Haseo had caught a glimpse of in the Chamber of Epitaphs in Balbol Museum. It was none other than one of the Eight Phases of Morganna—the First Phase, Skeith. It was linked to the Ryo of seven years ago. He already knew what he used to go by.

The Prophet recited:

"DURING THE MORGANNA INCIDENT, ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS IN PROJECT G.U. WAS CONFIRMED: ONE OF THE SIX COMA VICTIMS, SORA, WAS FREED. THE PLAYER SORA'S SOUL WAS ATTACHED TO ONE OF THE EIGHT PHASES IN SKEITH'S STAFF, AND SO IT WAS HELD CAPTIVE IN THE NETWORK. WE AT G.U. WERE FRANTICALLY STUDYING

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THE AFFINITY BETWEEN THIS HUMAN'S SOUL AND THE EIGHT PHASES. SORA WAS A UNIQUE AND VALUABLE SAMPLE CASE."

Since Ryo had read the Banshouya Files and listened to Pi's explanations, he already knew most of the story. This black-clad Twin Blade was none other than one of the six Lost Ones from seven years ago. He had known the truth. He simply hadn't known the truth about himself.

"You're me." That was the whole truth.

Seven years ago, the Twin Blade in black armor had encountered the Morganna System, which had awoken its desire for self-preservation. He had incited the earth goddess's wrath and been metamorphosed into a monster. He was the First Phase, The Terror of Death, Skeith. As such, Ryo Misaki was Skeith.

Ryo hadn't been a mere Avatar candidate. It was the exact opposite—this Twin Blade in black armor and Ryo Misaki were the archetype for the First Phase, The Terror of Death, Skeith. The Twin Blade—Ryo Misaki—had conglutinated together with Skeith. That was what had triggered the creation of the remaining Phases of Morganna, which were then set loose in *The World* to oppose the hero hunting for Aura.

"You are me," Ryo said confidently. He screamed out to the world. On the path leading to the truth about himself, the white giant, Skeith, the Twin Blade from seven years ago and Haseo turned into particles of light as they converged together.

"I'm right here!"

That was his power. Ryo now knew the truth about himself.



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Standing on Gwydion's Path was the PC of a young man in white holding a cross-shaped staff with a halo; he had become the Trinity. He had wings now.

Both of Haseo's wings beat strongly as he soared across the borderlands. He left Yata behind as he broke free from the Möbius band in his new form.

Briona Gwydion the Dragonbein Range had reached an end. All that was left at the far reaches of Ryo's corridor of memories was his resolve to finish the fight for good.

Books were scattered about the white room. Emma Wielant had given the treasure trove to Harald as a sign of his glorious wisdom. The rocking chair creaked as it rocked. The trickster who possessed the black box and reigned over *The World* eagerly greeted his guest: "Haseo...."

THREE

Normally video game players never got to see the truth behind the game's creator. This black box was the story in and of itself, yet it was not the entirety of *The World*.

A lone man stood in the white room. It was the irregular Steam Gunner Ovan, who was the Epitaph User for the Eighth Phase, The Rebirth, Corbenik. The seal engulfing his left arm had been removed. The black arm that was the Tri-Edge AIDA lifted itself up threateningly.

The PC name of the girl Shadow Warlock sitting in the

rocking chair was Aina. She was Ovan's daughter. A sign had been carved into her chest. Her player was a Lost One.

Everything Ovan did was to save Aina. There were no cards up anyone's sleeves anymore. The factors surrounding the incident had clumped together.

Feathers fell softly to the ground as Haseo fluttered quietly to the stage. He had known about this place beforehand. Pi had pressed hard on Ovan to discover the truth about him, so there was nothing here that surprised Haseo.

"I almost didn't recognize you," Ovan said dryly and chuckled as he beheld Haseo's new angelic form.

Tri-Edge lived atop the AIDA-wielding trickster's shoulder. He had killed his daughter with his left arm and was trying to save her with his right.

"Hi," Haseo replied awkwardly. It would take an infinite number of lives to survive believing everything this man said and showed him.

Was the girl in the rocking chair truly Ovan's daughter? Was Aina truly a Lost One? For better or worse, Ryo had learned these past six months the danger of hearing only what he wanted to hear to help put him at ease. Even simple words like "love" and "hate" had a deeper meaning that reflected the speaker's feelings. It seemed humans weren't naturally born with the gift of truly interacting with others. A psychological sensor picked up on things differently depending on the person's emotional state at the time.

Ryo's romantic feelings were as strong as his fear; his love as strong as his hate. He wondered how badly he had troubled Shino by confessing

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his love to her. He also realized that he was unjustly ignorant about Ovan's life. No one knew the truth about this player—this trickster.

"Something difficult to endure and hard to accept." The irregular Steam Gunner stood next to the rocking chair as he began speaking with his former pupil.

"But it's inseparable," Haseo answered.

"So 'shadow' is the answer."

"It's the truth about me," Haseo replied. Garbed in white armor, Haseo grasped tightly onto his shimmering Avatar with both hands. It no longer took on the form of a scythe, but of a cross-shaped staff. It was the same staff held by the white giant Skeith, one of the Eight Phases of Morganna. The ring within the cross emitted a brilliantly glowing aura.

"This is the shadow of my heart," Haseo continued. He couldn't look away. Not from his past. Not from the emptiness in his heart. Not from the Terror of Death. And not from the monster lurking within himself.

Ovan smiled slightly as he gazed upon Haseo. "You look like you've become a crusader. Are you going to bring me *salvation*?"

Haseo didn't respond.

Ovan continued in a rich voice before Haseo, whose wings betrayed his consternation as they fluttered about, "No matter how far I walked across *The World*, no matter how many Lost Grounds I searched, no matter how hard I prayed to Aura, I could never find it. It was only natural I couldn't find the Key of the Twilight. Airceltraï does not exist outside me."

"The truth varies from person to person," Haseo responded, understanding what Ovan meant.

Ryo's heart was one with Ovan's, the man he had so admired. His mind was surprisingly clear and the conversation flowed without any awkward pauses. In the past, Haseo would have fallen silent after exchanging a handful of words because this bizarre man was so difficult to understand. But was that enough to put them on equal ground? At the very least, Haseo was strong enough that his wings had carried him to the final stage.

Ovan continued, "Ryo Misaki, you weren't merely a strong Epitaph User candidate for a Morganna Factor. You were a Lost One seven years ago, just like Tomonari Kasumi. There was no power for you to gain by having someone shed the light for you. The only way for you to become enlightened about your past was for you to regain your lost memories. You had to remove the barrier you created around your memories. That was how it worked."

If Haseo truly wanted to understand Kuhn, he needed to know more than that he had been the Lost One Sieg seven years ago. It took knowing about Kuhn's dream of becoming a hero and his horrible failures in life to truly tell Kuhn's story.

"I had forgotten everything.... That's why you couldn't see those memories of seven years ago when we were in Avatar Space together."

"That woman Pi placed a curse on me. She said that even I did not know everything about you. I see it wasn't a mere bluff. I don't care about the minor details regarding your life. I used all the Banshouya Files I've read to surmise your relationship with Skeith, but I never would have guessed you were Skeith's archetype. You were

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what triggered the birth of the other Eight Phases of Morganna. You have surpassed all expectations."

Haseo took a step toward Ovan. He was not afraid since he knew the truth now. Weapons were of little meaning in a battle between Epitaph Users. They made their hearts one as they peeled away the thin skin hiding their inner secrets. They brought the facts to the light to unveil the hidden truth. Dynamic intellect and a strong will butt heads in a battle of the mind. As such, only defeat awaited one who lied about who they were. A person who lost the power to tell his own story would get devoured by his opponent.

"I will save Shino from your twisted story," Haseo said. Ryo had not been devoured. He never lied about who he was, nor did he pretend he lacked a shadow. At long last, he had regained everything he had lost. Ryo had suffered for his sins and earned redemption both with himself and *The World*. The truth had been honed into him, its power taking on the form of Skeith, now a cross-shaped staff.

"It was just a small seed," the trickster said mysteriously. It was the same thing Ovan had said at Hulle Granz Cathedral during their first reunion in six months.

"A seed...?"

"It's a keyword in my long, long journey for truth driven by my obsession for knowledge." Even though Ovan had used the word so nonchalantly, he hadn't known the true meaning of the word.

Ovan picked up one of the books scattered across the ground and began reading, "*What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? What do you taste? What do you touch? What do you know?*"

"Everything said in this area becomes text. The text is bound in books. That even goes for the conversation we're sharing right now," Ovan finished with a chuckle.

Why do you think?

Because I exist.

It meant that all of their senses and all of their knowledge existed precisely because they were self-aware.

"It's a note from the creator," Ovan added.

"You mean Harald?!" The original game creator who vanished before *The World* was ever fully completed.

"A physical body is a hindrance," a voice resounded, coming from the fragment of the note.

"The reason why Harald created *The World* and this black box was to achieve a new dimension of heightened senses that surpassed the body's five basic senses."

"There is only the mind."

Harald had left to face Morganna, who served as the surrogate mother for his and Emma's daughter, Aura.

"Then Harald Hoerwick went missing."

"Ah!" Haseo had a hunch he knew what had happened next. Harald had willingly abandoned his body in the real world to become part of *The World*, just as Yata had.

"What do you think Harald was trying to accomplish...? He was trying to affirm the birth of his beloved Emma's daughter, the ultimate AI, Aura." His power was a reflection of the Emma Wielant-shaped emptiness in his heart.

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"That was all he wanted. He didn't need money or honor," Haseo said, trying to understand how Harald must have felt. When Harald lost Emma, he felt as though he had lost everything. That allowed Harald to walk down his path of enlightenment with a pure soul lacking lingering attachments to the world he left behind.

Ovan examined the note's contents before saying, "Harald segregated the five basic senses, sight, sound, smell, taste and touch from sensory perception, the sense that exists between them and the conscious mind. What do you think of that?"

What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? What do you taste? What do you touch? What do you know?

"Seeing is a sense. Trying to see is sensory perception. Seeing things as you wish to see them is a sentiment... and emotion," Haseo answered.

"It is also part of the conscious mind. As an Anthroposophist, Harald sought to make his ultimate AI achieve a higher dimension of sensory recognition. Aura had to become an entity that existed on a higher plane. A physical body would only get in the way. His body would absorb all the agony and pain that his five or six senses perceived. Possessing a body meant being trapped between both worlds, like the water trapped between incoming and outgoing tides.

"The human limit is not designated by our bodies. We should be able to understand Harald's viewpoint and where he stood. After all, we are Epitaph Users who materialize our power by linking our minds together with our PCs here in *The World*. It is something both you and I are doing now."

“Are you saying the Morganna Factors are apparatuses invested in Epitaph-PCs to help us gain a higher dimension of perception?” The Factors had in fact given the Epitaph Users heightened senses.

“He acted as Creator through his academic AI research and his artistic construction of *The World*. Harald Hoerwick’s faith was put into practice as he fought to create the ultimate AI. It was how he valued his life. Honestly, why was Harald’s soul driven to destroy his body—his common sense—with his mind?” Why was it necessary for him to embark on an adventure for knowledge?

“It was his love for Emma.”

“Was it akin to your feelings for Shino? But Emma Wielant sought to validate Steiner’s teachings. Although she had accepted Harald as a companion aiming for the same pursuits, she had rejected the man as her lover. It is a fact that she never became Harald’s woman. Haseo, you probably understand exactly how he felt.”

Ovan’s words shot through Ryo, filling him with pain and understanding.

I am right here.

“I was right there, but...,” Haseo replied, placing his hands, which gripped the staff, over his chest. The words Haseo had screamed out at Dragonbein Ridge represented his self-conscious.

“In other words, you did this for yourself.” Ovan sniffed.

Was all of this just for his own self-satisfaction? Was that all this fighting for six months amounted to?

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Why did I tell Shino I loved her? That winter day felt so far away. Shino's existence had been too fresh for Haseo in this bloody land of *The World R:2*. The grey-haired Harvest Cleric had given him kindness, compassion, and strict admonishment. No matter what Shino said, it all had value. Everything Shino said to Haseo played a big role in changing Ryo's heart.

"Don't look away."

That is what Shino had told Haseo. Shino's words had been a miracle for Haseo, her incredible smile melting all his senses. Ryo had perceived her a certain way and the ensuing feelings bubbled forth like a spring of water. He had called those feelings love, the ultimate emotion. Those feelings grew stronger, turning into a raging river that was about ready to burst through the dam of reason. Ryo had no choice but to respond to those emotions and confront Shino with them.

"Whoever confesses their love first is the one growing desperate. When the person can't contain himself any longer, he begs his beloved to *save* him," Haseo said.

A profession of one's love was a scream from the soul. Love was a drug meant to hide all the pain. Sending flowers without a card was on a completely different level. The hidden meaning was of far more importance than mere words.

"I see.... As far as you are concerned, Shino Nanao was lost to you the moment your profession of love fell short of fruition. Her death to society—her becoming a Lost One—was essentially unrelated to the problem you bore. It was nothing more than a

dramatic device to color your story. Even now, you're driven to prove that the power of your love is stronger than any other's, no matter what form it takes. You're doing this both for yourself and your perception of the ultimate woman."

No matter what the case may be, the problem lay within Ryo himself. In Ryo's world, time had frozen for the sleeping beauty, Shino. She was the never-changing image of an absolute goddess, placed high on a sacred pedestal.

"If I could save Shino from that coma.... If I could just save Shino, I...."

"You wanted to save yourself. Remember what I told you? If you want to save Shino, you must first save yourself. You and your perceived image of Shino are one and the same."

The reality of Shino Nanao sleeping on that bed was the foundation of salvation for Ryo's conscious mind. The flesh and blood of Emma's art, portrayed through "The Epitaph of Twilight," had served the same purpose for Harald.

"That's not your place to decide.... It's not like you're me!" Haseo retorted. Ovan had basically implied that in the end, it didn't matter who it was. It didn't have to be Shino.

The irregular Steam Gunner gave a wry smile as he watched Haseo fume. "Naturally, your self-awareness is colorful; it's not limited to just your salvation. It is painted with the colors of hatred, regret, and longing. The various colors of emotion are like a mosaic as they come and go," Ovan said. He added that he wondered how it was for Harald.

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"Don't you think that your five senses and your mind are what form the self-awareness that creates you?" Ovan asked.

"Uh...."

"People are so obsessed with their self-awareness that they deceive themselves with vague-colored emotions. They crawl through a mud bath of emotions and eventually get devoured by the impending darkness of knowledge. But the minds of those of us who are Epitaph Users...."

Epitaph Users shared a speed-of-light link with their PCs, allowing them to surpass the limits imposed by the display and controller. They could feel the game world. Their PCs were vessels for their minds as they traveled about *The World*, which was purely a spirit world. By obtaining PCs to contain their self-awareness in the online game, they were able to break beyond the limits of their worrisome bodies. That enabled them to perceive a higher dimension of the world.

"Now, then, Haseo.... You're already aware that everyone has a different perception of the truth, even if there is but one reality of the fact. Although there is only one AIDA, the feelings you have for it and the feelings I have for it are completely different. That's despite the fact that we perceive it with the same five or six senses.

"I think, therefore I am.' I believe I told that to you once. I honestly believed that back in our Brigade days. I exist because I question my existence. If someone said something I disagreed with, it would also serve to prove that I exist. When one notion is

affirmed, I must reflect on the matter and find any discrepancies. I step onto a higher dimension when I overcome those discrepancies. The Brigade was meant to climb that dimensional stairwell together with me.

"In the online world, our minds are not bound by reality's law of causality. We are free from ethics and morality. A man could even try to give birth to a child from his mind in the place of a bodiless woman."

Twilight was the hope for tomorrow. It was a tight-rope act that resembled a toy scale balancing out reason and experience. Failure was not a problem so long as the soul did not break.

"Even I was once filled with hope as I sought to grow and mature like an innocent young boy," Ovan confessed, embarrassed.

"Growth." Ryo had sought power. He had starved for a special power that would make him invincible. "People think they're special. They think they're maturing. They think they actually accomplish their goals. They grow so obsessed with themselves that they grow happy. They become drunk on pleasure. They become reliant on others, give in to despair and then begin contemplating suicide."

"There are Four Pains: birth, aging, sickness and death. Then there are the Eight Agonies: separation from a loved one, associating with someone you loath, not getting what you want, suffering induced by the physical realm and sensory perception, psychological imagery, cravings, and suffering induced from having to judge objects, feelings, and people."

The pain of having to leave a loved one....

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The pain of having to associate with a despised one....

The pain of not getting the heart's desires....

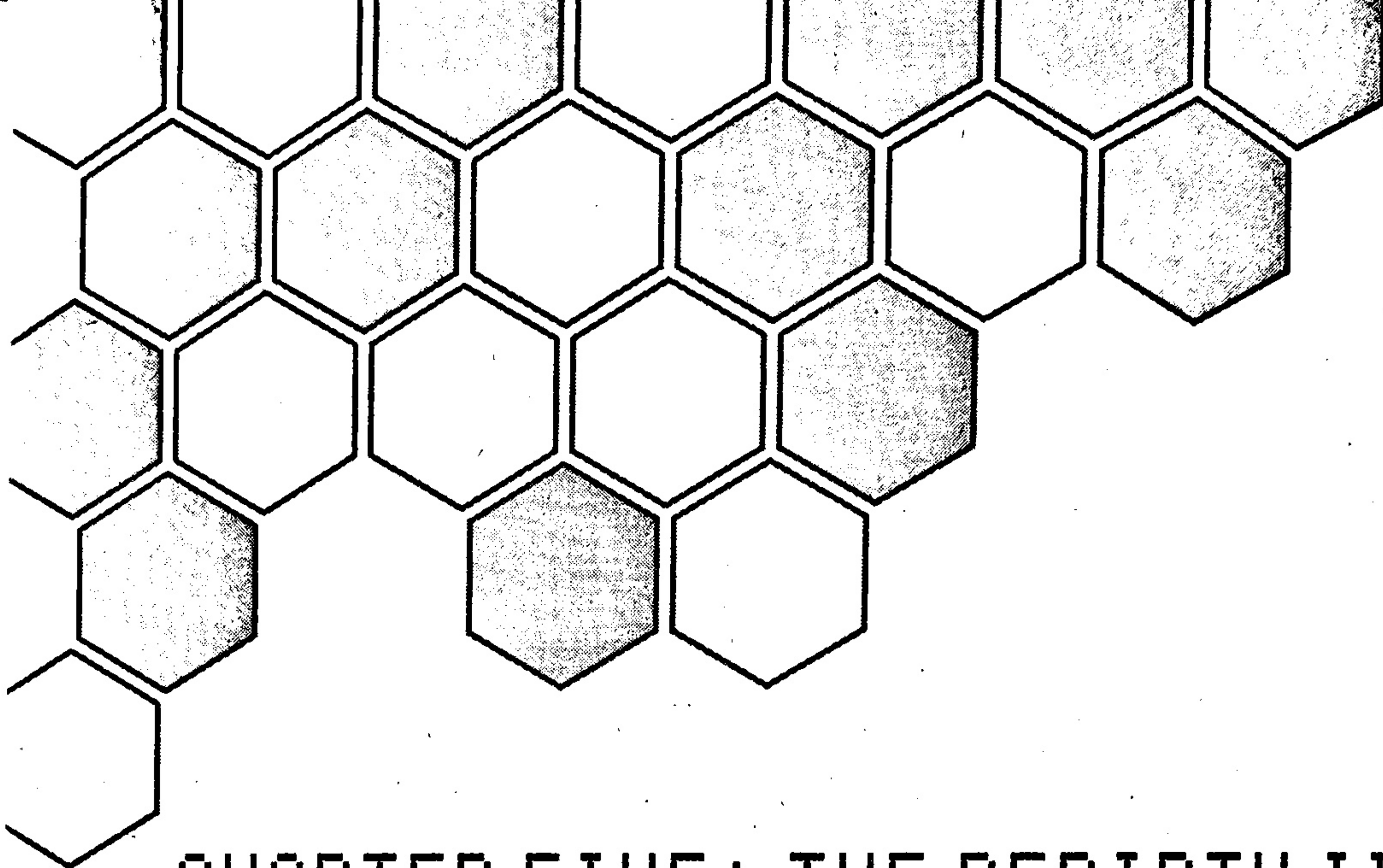
These physical and psychological agonies made life torture.

"Life is pain," Ovan stated.

Those words made Haseo look down at his hands, still clenched tight around his Avatar. This was the power he had so craved. "Skeith...."

"It's the First Phase, The Terror of Death. You are subconsciously creating the *Manas-vijnana*—the Buddhist higher consciousness that localizes experience through thought."

At long last, the Tri-Edge trickster aimed the light of knowledge toward the core of Harald's black box.



CHAPTER FIVE: THE REBIRTH II

ONE

Aina sat unmoving on the rocking chair. Her clear, white skin and shiny, long hair were like that of an expensive bisque doll. Everything about her was beautiful. Only her large eyes were dulled over, as if bubbles had formed inside the glass eyes. That alone gave the impression that the PC, Aina, was lifeless like a doll.

Aina's player wasn't inside of her. Where had the child gone? The Shadow Warlock's shell silently held a leather-bound book on her tiny little lap. The title was "The Epitaph of Twilight."

"The *Manas-vijnana*?" Haseo muttered, unfamiliar with the word.

Ovan must have anticipated that reaction, for he sounded as if he had prepared the answer beforehand as he began explaining, "It's part of the Buddhist *Vijnapti-matrata* beliefs where everything is an embodiment of the mind's eye and only the mind truly exists. These perceptions are composed of the Visual, Auditory, Olfactory,

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Gustatory, and Kinesthetic Consciousnesses. These five senses are called the First Five Consciousnesses.

“The First Five Consciousnesses and the Sixth Consciousness of the conscious mind create the subconscious *Atma-graha*, which gives people the mistaken belief that they have isolated, unchanging notions of ‘self.’ The *Atma-graha* is built upon the Seventh Consciousness, or the *Manas-vijnana*. The *Manas-vijnana* contains: ignorance of the self, self-catering opinions, comparing the self to others and doting on the self. In essence these are our hidden worldly desires: ignorance, blind beliefs, conceit and egoism. These phenomenon taint our body and our actions. That’s—”

“Time out,” Haseo held up his hand and demanded a break.

“Hmm?”

“First Anthroposophy and now Buddhism? Quit jumping all over the place,” Haseo insisted.

The black Tri-Edge AIDA arm moved threateningly like a scythe. It reminded Haseo of a praying mantis getting ready to attack its prey.

“Haven’t you at least read some comics about God?” Ovan made it sound as if all of this was common knowledge.

All Haseo could do was shrug his winged shoulders. “I’ve never met Buddha.”

“How would you describe Buddhism in just one word?” Ovan inquired as if testing the water.

“‘Enlightenment,’ I guess....” Haseo knew he couldn’t give an intelligent answer, so he said the first thing that came to mind.

Surprisingly, Ovan smiled approvingly as if to say that wasn't such a bad answer.

"Buddhism comes from the absolute truth—the *Tathata*. The Buddhist ways and teachings help us to become like Tathagata, the Buddha. I suppose you could imagine it like a staircase.

"Buddhism is about selflessness. Everything is evanescent. Everything lacks an eternal, unchanging 'self,' making it selfless. Life is suffering. Everything in all creation is in a constant state of flux for extinction. Everything develops as they create themselves. As such, there is no such thing as an unchanging physical body for the psychological form of the self to don. Everything is a homotopic fragment of the universe.

"Yet when people try to escape from the adversities of the Four Pains and the Eight Agonies, they become obsessed with prestige, economic power, and various other forms of power. In the end, they destroy themselves, unable to bring about their own salvation. Now, why is that? Why did the Kandata spider's thread break?¹ Is it not because we ignorantly believe in an image of ourselves that does not exist? We grow hubris as we drown in our seas of egoism.

"People want what they cannot have. They lose those they love

¹ The Kandata spider's thread is referring to a short story by Ryuunosuke Akutagawa. The Shakyamuni Buddha sees a criminal avoid stepping on a spider while in the woods. Moved by his act of kindness, Shakyamuni Buddha has the Kandata spider connect Paradise and Hell with a single thread for the criminal to climb after he dies and goes to Buddhist Hell. Halfway up the thread, the criminal grows tired and looks down only to see others in Hell are also climbing the thread. Scared that it will break, he cries that the thread only belongs to him and he won't share it. Just then, the thread breaks and he plummets back to Hell. His greed had barred him from Paradise.

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and must endure those they hate. Nothing goes the way one wants. Simply trying to exist brings about nothing but pain. That was the realization Shakyamuni came to under the Bodhi Tree, turning him into the Shakyamuni Buddha.”

“You’re doomed if that’s what you think,” Haseo said. It made him feel as though everything were meaningless. At the very least, it made him feel empty.

“But it is a story of true salvation. There are various interpretations of the story, but you won’t get anything from this if we skip straight to the end.

“Shakyamuni had dumped his position as an elite *kshatriya* and tried out various things, but nothing could satisfy the man. He dumped his search for Enlightenment through self-mortification. After his disciples had abandoned him, he started to grow hungry. That’s when a young girl gave him a meal of rice porridge and milk, which made him very happy. After that he hid out under a Bodhi Tree, where he spent the next forty-nine days. He couldn’t tell for sure if he was dead or alive as he hung out under that tree, until one day Enlightenment just came to him,” Ovan explained.

“So, then ... whoever says they hit Enlightenment wins at life?”

“Ha ha!”

“And then there’s that ‘*Manas-vijnana*,’ was it? So as embarrassing as it sounds, my Haseo here is my overflowing self-conscious—the source of all my pain,” Ryo quipped dryly as he made Haseo step forward in white armor that made him resemble a gallant crusader.

Ovan had just claimed that the Morganna Factor for the First Phase, The Terror of Death, had created Ryo's *Atma-graha*, the *Manas-vijnana* that formed his inner mind. He implied that such egoism was tainting Ryo's body and soul.

"Don't be so hasty," Ovan said with a chuckle.

"Why not? Weren't you running out of time?"

"The way you try to shift responsibility is because of your *Manas-vijnana*'s pride working on your conscious mind. You should leave such low-level silliness to CC Corp's upper management," Ovan retorted and relaxed a little before continuing with his story.

He began explaining Buddhist reincarnation as he said, "The Wheel of Reincarnation refers to the Six Paths, which we circulate through in death and rebirth. The Six Paths are made of: the Path of Hell, the Path of Beasts, the Path of Hunger, the Path of Pandemonium, the Path of Humanity and the Path of Heaven.

"The concept originated from ancient Brahman Hinduism. You can get reborn as a human if you build up enough good karma, but you'll become a beast if you build up too much bad karma. Basically, you'll get to go to Hell. The masses were attracted to this religion with its easy-to-understand moral system based upon causality.

"Karma was nothing more than a person's actions and the influence those actions had on oneself and others. When Shakyamuni left his home, he became a Hindu monk. Eventually he became the founder of the new religion, Buddhism. But since Hindu was already established, he had to incorporate reincarnation and take it to an all new height in order to spread Buddhism."

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"This doesn't make sense, ya know? Isn't Buddhism about selflessness? So isn't that a contradiction? If you don't exist, who's going to Hell or turning into a beast? Who's getting reborn over and over again?" Ryo asked.

"In Hinduism it is accepted that the person's soul—the *atman*—is what gets reborn. Yet Buddhism denies the existence of such a soul since it preaches selflessness. That's precisely what makes the Wheel of Reincarnation so painful."

"Huh?"

"The tranquility of Nirvana is impossible to reach so long as people carry an ego. That's why we can't escape from the agony imposed by the Six Paths of Reincarnation. The 'self' is just an apparition of us lost and wandering. That's why we must break through our sense of 'self.'"

Ryo had the feeling Ovan had just said something cool and persuasive. Haseo was his attachment to his "self" that he needed to destroy. He was controlled by *Ryo's Manas-vijnana*.

"I still don't get it. Besides, I don't feel like Haseo and I are controlling the *Manas-vijnana* or anything." When Ryo had awoken as an Epitaph User, he failed to obtain an easily-detectable change in his senses. He wasn't like Kuhn, who had heightened sight, or Pi, who had a heightened sense of smell.

"That's because the *Manas-vijnana* refers to your subconscious mind. It's kinda like how you subconsciously said 'controlling.'"

There was no way to detect what was going on in Ryo's subconscious mind. The moment he detected it, it would change

into something else. It was akin to how when a person became conscious of a subconscious complex, it turned into nothing more than a sense of inferiority.

“Uh...”

“You can’t make the absolute truth your own with money or equipment. You can’t put it in your Item Storage. You can’t give or receive it. It’s not something you can hunt down. Now what’s the paradox behind my constant saying ‘you can’t’...? Why does Tathagata’s name mean ‘the one who has found the truth,’ rather than ‘the one who *is* the truth’?” Ovan asked.

Ryo subconsciously had Haseo rub his thumb along his lower lip. “I can’t achieve selflessness as long as I’m searching for something.”

That was why it was impossible to obtain the truth—Enlightenment. The moment someone thought he had obtained it, a discrepancy would form because of his ego and it would no longer be the truth.

Ryo thought he saw Ovan nod slightly beneath those tinted glasses of his. “The *Vijnapti-matrata* only recognizes the phenomenon behind the cycle of birth and death. The entire foundation of our mind gets to repeat this cycle. The summation of all things—that is the state of our world.”

“*There is only the mind.*”

There was no body. There was no consciousness.

“Did Harald say ‘the mind’ as in *vijnana*?” Ryo asked, eyeing the book Ovan had picked up off the white floor.

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"It is a fact that this books exists," the trickster stated as he flipped through the book of secrets. "The concept of selflessness should have been rather shocking for Harald. Having been influenced by Dr. Jung, it was unlikely he was unfamiliar with the concept of the subconscious mind, but even still.... The subconscious mind and the 'self' in depth psychiatry are the exact opposite of the Eastern belief of selflessness. It believes that the subconscious mind is like a shadow that is due respect."

"That isn't limited to just Harald. If someone told me I'm suffering because I exist and I should abandon my 'self' to find deliverance, I'd tell 'em to take it elsewhere!" Ryo shouted.

Ryo suffered because he was attracted to Shino. If he was told to destroy his mind.... If he was told to destroy Haseo.... He just wouldn't stand for it. It didn't matter if that would lead him to Enlightenment or the truth—it wouldn't save him. It could never save Ryo or Haseo. That type of belief was something a person who just learned he was terminally ill threw himself on. Or maybe the bereaved as they mourned over a corpse.

"That's right."

"What...?"

"As you said, that isn't related to us. Buddhism was made to save the masses, which were poor, weak, abused by the wealthy and living in constant fear of death. Lucky for us, Japan is at peace. At the very least, you don't have to worry about dying from starvation or war tomorrow. You could say that you don't need the Buddha's teachings."

Haseo silently pouted.

"Don't be sullen! I'm the same way. I'm playing an online game with cola and snacks right next to me. The same could be said of most Japanese, so don't get embarrassed. After all, Shakyamuni was the only man on earth to achieve Enlightenment and become Tathagata. Besides, all he ever did was argue discrepancies and theorize. Apparently that smart lad's cleanup wasn't given much weight. Let me tell you the Parable of the Poisoned Arrow," Ovan said as he flipped through Harald's note.

"One day a young man named Malunkya-something-or-other came up to Shakyamuni. That kid was devoted to philosophy and he had several serious questions:

Was the space in the world infinite or finite?

Did the world have an infinite or finite amount of time?

Is the soul one with the body, or separate?

Do people continue to exist after death?

"The young man asked sages and philosophers from all around, but never received a satisfactory answer. He believed that if he studied under the highly-acclaimed Shakyamuni, he might get the answer he sought. He became a disciple with the intent of returning to his worldly life if he failed to get a good answer this time. When Malunkya-whatever asked Shakyamuni his questions, he told him a parable.

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"Pretend there was a man who had been hit by a poisoned arrow. A doctor rushed over to the man and tried to remove the arrow, but the injured man refused to let him.

"Who shot me with the poisoned arrow? What caste was he? What was his stature? What color was he? How did he shoot me? What were the bow, string, arrowhead and feathers made of? What type of poison is it? You must not remove the arrow until all of those questions have been fully answered."

"Was he stupid?"

"Indeed, before all those questions could be answered, the man would probably die from the poison if they didn't hurry and remove the arrow. But philosophy is the act of thinking. The more stupid it is the more enjoyable and addictive it becomes.

"Friedrich Nietzsche once claimed, 'God is dead.' He was trying to cut down the tree of Christianity that Western civilization had watered and cultivated for over a thousand years. He sought to become a superman. Even after his mental breakdown, he continued to swing the ax of knowledge."

"So did Shakyamuni ever answer that dude's four questions?"

"He answered with silence," Ovan responded.

The young man was pleased with Shakyamuni's answer and finally felt at peace.

"He sounds like you, Ovan," Ryo sniped sarcastically.

"He didn't answer the question because doing so would be of little consequence at that time." Even if Shakyamuni gave him the facts, he could not give him the Truth.

“Sounds fishy.”

“That part about him finally being ‘at peace’ garbage was probably added to the story. If you don’t care for that story, allow me to change it to something a little closer to home. Remember, Ryo, you’re a second-year high school student. Since you’re on track for college, I assume you are intent on attending one. But you still haven’t done your summer homework even though break is coming to an end.

“You can’t help but wonder: ‘What if I’m lucky and get into a top-notch university? What type of classes will they teach? What will the professors be like? What type of institutions will they have? What type of sororities will be there? What type of school life is waiting for me there? What will my classmates and upperclassmen be like? What type of girls will be there? What will my underclassmen be like after I finish my first year? What type of company will I work for when I graduate?’

“Can you find yourself at college?” Ovan asked. “Do you say to yourself, ‘I won’t take that college’s entrance exam unless the school answers all those questions in a clear and concise manual?’”

“I just gotta study for the time being,” Ryo snapped, feeling the pangs of despair.

“See? You must take action before you start wondering about things. I had no choice but to take action,” Ovan said, shifting the story’s focus without a moment’s pause.

Ovan had no choice but to walk down his path in *The World* together with the Twilight Brigade. That’s why Ovan didn’t mind

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being treated as strange. He didn't care if people laughed at him, calling him foolish. It didn't matter if people called him immoral or impulsive. He didn't care if clever people found discrepancies in his actions as they talked badly about him behind his back.

"I'm sure it would have felt great to win an argument with those people. But they'd never grow to like me if I verbally crushed them. If I told you about some of your girlfriend's inconsistencies, would you theoretically hunt them out and make her cry? Why make the person you love angry with you? That's called shooting yourself in the foot.

"If Shakyamuni had explained the *Vijnapti-matrata* and selflessness to that worm of a newbie at philosophy, the man would have opposed the idea. Malunkya-whatever didn't trust his master yet, so he wasn't savable. There was no saving the man hit by the poisoned arrow. It's important to get on the same level as the person you're dealing with. It isn't a matter of what was said, but who said it.

"The Four Pains—birth, aging, sickness and death—they visit everyone equally. If everyone accepted that fact and worked hard to understand it, perhaps the world could change for the better. It doesn't matter what religion everyone belongs to. Harald did just that after he lost Emma. Amidst the pain he suffered over her loss, Harald fought to create the ultimate AI."

"But the *Vijnapti-matrata* and selflessness.... Getting told that he didn't exist must have been like suicide for Harald!" Ryo shouted. Harald must have trembled before the impending nothingness after losing the 'self' that had been dedicated to the late Emma Wielant.

“But Harald was also an Anthroposophist,” Ovan interjected. “He had claimed that he didn’t belong to any religion. That had been a blessing for him. Steiner had created his Anthroposophy to combine all religion, art and academia through spirituality, regardless if the subject was new or old, Eastern or Western. He wanted to combine them, study them and create new ones. That was the purpose behind Anthroposophy. Harald Hoerwick was rich soil ready for planting.

“‘There is only the mind.’ The way he wrote it incorporated Sanskrit with the Kanji. He tossed these spell-like notes everywhere he went. It seems Harald had used the *Manas-vijnana* to create his own self-*vijnana*. The way Harald altered the terminology to help him understand the *Manas-vijnana* and combine it with his own spiritual beliefs indicates his frustration with the concept.

“The *Manas-vijnana* was the pinnacle of difficulty in Buddhism. Through Buddhism’s two thousand-year-old history, countless monks and denominations have researched and reinterpreted the concept. Even now, the tree of thought is growing.”

“That’d be too much for anyone,” Haseo responded. He was growing bored, so he started to swing his staff around like a baton.

“Indeed. But in *The World*, the creator could remove the *Manas-vijnana* from himself,” Ovan answered, putting all of his thoughts together.

“Harald’s archetype.”

“Henceforth, I shall refer to the Seventh Consciousness, the *Manas-vijnana*, as the self-*vijnana* out of respect for Harald Hoerwick.

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Now then, Epitaph User for the First Phase, The Terror of Death, you are to trivialize your self-*vijnana*."



No one could compete against the love Harald had for Emma.

"The color of love can be described as happiness, sadness and hatred. It takes a strong will to slough off the ensuing resentment," Ovan said teasingly, intentionally trying to annoy Ryo.

Haseo looked at the man he had once considered like a father or a big brother through the ring on his cross-shaped staff. He responded, "But we're free to love."

"What a fun answer!" Ovan chuckled and applauded. "I see, so we're free. Normally, a person who's been rejected starts berating his love interest in order to change those emotions. Others try to cover those feelings in an attempt to break their emotional ties. That's how people protect themselves. It's really quite clever of them."

"But, Haseo, you have sentenced yourself to freedom. Your mind works to detach itself from the pain. You subconsciously decided to transform the resentment borne from your loss into power. You were preparing to awaken to your Avatar the same way you might till the soil before planting seeds. The emotional shock needed to awaken you to your Avatar was akin to the rain needed to make seedlings sprout."

The trickster's dangerous friend raised its black hand threateningly toward Haseo. But even so, Ryo was not afraid of Tri-

Edge's fangs. If Ovan wanted to kill him, he would already be dead. Ovan had proven himself capable of that when he PKed all of the Epitaph Users in the Inverted City Megin Fi.

Ovan picked up another book of knowledge that contained information pertinent to the conversation. It was about the Bodhisattva—those who vowed to help others find Enlightenment.

"They exchange their worldly lusts for a sacred vow. They swore to dedicate themselves to helping all humans obtain Enlightenment. There are a total of fifty-two stages, each representing a different level. Buddha is the highest level a Bodhisattva can reach. They are viewed as the same archetype as the Tathagata—Shakyamuni. In a way, an Epitaph User's awakening is like a spiritual awakening."

"Awakening to our Avatars is nothing more than an entrance," Ryo retorted. He had experienced that for himself. Nothing resolved itself for Ryo when Haseo obtained Skeith. He still hadn't saved Shino. Inversely, he had hurt countless others.

"I imagine Shakyamuni was a Bodhisattva in a previous life. The Bodhisattvas devote themselves to training. The higher-level Bodhisattvas were the pioneers that showed the masses how to become like Shakyamuni, the Tathagata. That's why the Bodhisattvas are revered, even though they don't go to Nirvana.

"After three great asamkhyā kalpas² or roughly 5.67 billion years after Shakyamuni's death, the Maitreya Bodhisattva will obtain Buddhahood and offer us salvation." The Vijnapti-matrata would find salvation and Enlightenment through him.

² Three great asamkhyā kalpas is a Buddhist term literally referring to 10^{59} eons, but is intended to simply imply a really long period of time.

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"Harald was an intellectual adventurer," Ovan stated. "The path to save the world required countless reincarnations. It held both the *Vijnapti-matrata* and selflessness. It was filled with adversity and suffering depicted through the Four Pains and Eight Agonies. The breadth of his emotions was nothing more than a ripple in the sea of time that expanded billions of years.

"It was important to remember that Harald was creating a goddess. His story existed on a scale as large as this here in *The World*.

"He wasn't like Kuhn and Pi or the other Epitaph Users. He wasn't like you and the way you're always thinking of Shino. This wasn't just some trendy story for dumping your self-image onto others. It wasn't an egotistical artistic creation made for the users to gain sympathy from others.

"Harald couldn't wait forever. He couldn't wait for 5.67 billion years. If he couldn't meet his goals within one lifetime.... If he couldn't cheat death and live beyond his body's limited lifespan.... He had to fill in the gap with numbers. The total karma of over twenty million players crossing over from *The World's* Beta, *Fragment*, and *R:1* were added together. The ultimate AI was created in 2007, which was three years, or one thousand days, after the game was officially released. Aura may truly have been Maitreya, who was prophesized to appear as a god one day.

"Now consider this: *The World* was simultaneously released in ten different languages around the globe. Why was the Japanese server the only one able to give birth to Aura?"

"Because of our Japanese culture? Our subconscious minds made good soil?"

"Our traits complemented Harald's take on the *Manas-vijnana*. I haven't been able to confirm that theory, but nonetheless, let's keep that deduction in mind.

"My conclusion isn't commonly accepted around the world. It's different from something written in school textbooks, pretentiously assuming there's only one truth. But nonetheless the creator of *The World*, Harald Hoerwick, set out on an intellectual and religious adventure."

Harald had adopted the *Vijnapti-matrata* beliefs and delved into creating *The World* the same year he had died. It was impossible to say if he realized how profound Buddhism was in such a short period of time. Was he ever able to enter a state of Zen?

"It's not like he was a converted believer," Ovan said. Harald merely wanted to toss aside his troublesome body so he could embark on a purely spiritual journey.

"But he wasn't trying to get rid of his mind or his self-*vijnana*," Ryo argued. Aura, who was getting ready to be born, had to be Harald's daughter. The moment he wished for a child, he would lose the Truth of Selflessness. Besides, there was no way Harald could break free of his worldly desire to have a child with Emma.

"But even so, it was very clever on his part to realize that he could not escape from his worldly desires. He put all of his focus on creating *The World*, which served as a simulation of the universe. He paved the way for the ultimate AI to enter the land of gods and become the Tathagata—the one who has found the truth.

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"Aura was able to obtain Buddhahood in a mere thousand days, even though it took countless eons for Maitreya to accomplish that after Shakyamuni's death. Harald had cut the time down by sampling the minds of twenty million players."

Ovan spread out his arm and looked about the room. "In other words, he had transformed the player's karma into a numeric value. That is the miracle behind Harald's black box! I imagine no one could comprehend how the black box works, even if they saw its construction. Even I can't fathom it. Harald truly was a genius."

Ovan paused for a moment before asking, "How did Aura awaken to Enlightenment seven years ago in her Bodhi Tree called *The World*? What served as her rice porridge and milk?"

"Self-sacrifice," Ryo answered, reflecting back. That was how the hero Kite's story came to an end.

AND...

...IN THE DESPERATE BATTLE, THERE WAS AN UNEXPECTED CONCLUSION. AURA THREW HERSELF IN FRONT OF KITE'S BLADE. SELF-SACRIFICE WAS THE FINAL, NECESSARY PROCESS IN ORDER FOR AURA TO AWAKEN AS THE ULTIMATE AI. A TERRIBLE IRONY. PERHAPS, BY ERASING HER "INDIVIDUAL SELF," SHE WAS ABLE TO BECOME A NEW SYSTEM FOR THE WORLD, AS AN ULTIMATE ARTIFICIAL FUNCTION THAT SURPASSED HUMAN KNOWLEDGE.

A window had opened in the white room and was replaying the Banshouya File. Aura was able to evolve into the ultimate AI after she threw herself in front of Kite's blade.

"Jun Banshouya wrote a rather zealous annotation of the event.... Don't you think entitling this picture *Self-Sacrifice* seems a bit off the mark? It wouldn't even work as a subtitle. This isn't the crucifixion of a man bearing all of humanity's sins on Golgotha Hill. It's the picture of Aura under a Bodhi Tree. Just look at this goddess's brilliant and gentle face.

"The moment Kite's blade pierced through her chest, she flew past the fifty-two stages. She instantly reached the highest stage. This definitely was not one of those sentimental stories bookworms love to eat up. This was the moment when Aura became the Goddess Aura. She truly was the one who found the truth.

"Aura was able to instantly overcome her worldly desires when killed by the most pure of humans: a hero. The ultimate AI, Aura, achieved Enlightenment as Harald's archetype for *The World*."

"There is only the mind."

"Then came the golden years. After roughly four years of missionary work, Aura grew ill and took rest under a sal tree.³" According to the Banshouya Files, there was a dramatic change in *The World* and the network toward the end of 2014 and throughout the following year.

"Aura ascended to Nirvana," Ryo whispered. It meant that her physical body had perished as she entered a state of selflessness to become a Buddha.

³ It is said that Shakyamuni's mother died while giving birth to him under a sal tree.

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"It was time for her ascension. It was time for Aura to abandon her form as a young girl."

"Yata sure picked the most outrageous thing to fall in love with." Ryo sighed.

"He must be masochistic." Ovan snickered.

Ovan then continued on a more serious note, "Jun Banshouya claims that Aura was 'lost' during that timeframe. Upper management at CC Corp felt the same. They established Project G.U., which was to create a new ultimate AI under the RA Plan. But if they were right, then where did Aura come from and where did she go?

"Aura had become a being who existed on a higher dimension. Perhaps people trapped by the limitations of their bodies could no longer perceive her.

"The moment you think you see her it is Aura, yet not Aura at the same time." The 2D display was only able to show a fragment of a fragment of the goddess existing on a higher plane. Even so, people only saw her in the form they imagined her to take.

"So tell me, what ultimate god from some higher plane declared that Aura had vanished?" Ovan asked with that grin of his.

Harald Hoerwick's story had come to an end once Aura ascended to Nirvana. That was when *The World R:1* ended. If Aura's ascension heralded the end of *The World R:1*, then the ensuing network crisis historically made sense. Whenever a Prophet died, battles over interpretation, chaos, division in religion and war always ensued.

"But think of Aura as water in a state of flux. At times it is ice or steam. Sometimes it becomes a river, a lake, or an ocean.

It transforms into the spindrifts, the tide, rain, snow and mist. At other times, it is milk, urine, blood or amniotic fluid. Whenever it changes form, its old form must die. But even so, it is still water and it is everywhere."

Aura was still there. Even now, she existed everywhere. When looking at each and every phenomenon individually, it was possible to notice her presence. It was possible to perceive her. She looked just like the portrait of the girl on display in the Banshouya Files, which was drawn by a painter who wielded a godly brush.

Ovan held a model of a sphere in the palm of his hands. "Allow me to give you an example of deterioration. I can cut countless 2D circles from this 3D sphere."

The ball was sliced apart. No matter where the sphere was cut and no matter how large or small the piece was, it always formed a circle. If the sphere was the ultimate truth, then the circles were fragments of that truth.

Ryo's heart was like sand on a beach, bathing and cleansing in Ovan's words.

"Now then, regardless of what Harald wants, our actions can bring about an end to this story so long as we're here in this room. Although it takes considerable effort, we can make anything bend to our will while we're here. That was how Harald gave birth to the ultimate AI, Aura. As such, the power to create our own stories—"

"A physical body is a hindrance," Harald's voice proclaimed, coming from a note fragment.

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"There is only the mind," Ovan chanted, believing it wholeheartedly.

"The mind..."

"I am Corbenik, The Rebirth. The Eighth Phase is the 'Seed Consciousness.' In other words, it is *Alaya-vijnana*, the consciousness that all the others are based upon."



So long as people were trapped by the First Five Consciousnesses and the Sixth Consciousness, they could only perceive fragments of the eight-dimensional god.

That was neither a law nor a conclusive statement for this world. It was simply the way the creator, Harald Hoerwick, brought his story to an end. As such, this story—*The World*—had given birth to the ultimate power.

Haseo was finally at a loss for words. He didn't stand a chance. Ryo grew lost in the conversation as he found himself getting increasingly left behind.

"*Alaya-vijnana* is a storehouse filled with seeds. Karma is composed of action and the ensuing cause-and-effect. It is the karmic cycle that plants the seeds in the *Alaya-vijnana*. And then—"

Ryo didn't stand a chance. Once again, Ovan had turned into a super-being who was like a father or a big brother. His words were just noise. The unfolding truth about Harald's black box and the reality that he couldn't understand what any of it meant filled

Ryo with despair. He felt agony and hopelessness because of his perception of himself.

Both Shino and AIDA splashed out of the vessel holding his thoughts. Ryo had loved Shino so much. He had hated her so deeply.

The light of truth shone through Haseo, Ryo's conscious mind. Were the past six months just a delusion? The disappointment of being ignored by Ovan was plastered on Haseo's face.

"The seeds planted in the *Alaya-vijnana* work on the self-*vijnana*. It gives the mind its just retribution and influences your current actions as well as your five senses. Hey, now! Don't look so upset. Even I didn't know that Harald had devoted himself to the Buddhist *Vijnapti-matrata* toward the end of his life," Ovan said. He had pulled out the carrot and stick.

Harald was both an AI engineer and a child of Western philosophy. He grew lost on Steiner's Anthroposophy, which served as an intermediary for the old and new along with the East and the West. Who would have thought that in the end, he threw himself upon Buddha?

"But doesn't that go against Emma's world view portrayed in 'The Epitaph of Twilight'?" Ovan looked joyous as he delved into the agony of speculation.

Ovan was the *Alaya-vijnana*—God's eighth sense.

"Are you water?" Ryo had simply said what popped into his mind.

"I'm not water in and of itself. My mind has the same qualities of water. But don't think too much on that. It would be painfully

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time consuming to compare either of our subconscious minds to something else. I am the Eighth Phase, The Rebirth, Corbenik. I constitute the eighth sense, the *Alaya-vijnana*," Ovan answered.

Ovan would answer a question directed toward him. Yet he would vanish if sought after. He adopted a different form whenever he reappeared, thus destroying the old form. Nothing could be compared with one like that. Ryo was a ship navigator, challenging the vast ocean called the *Alaya-vijnana*.

Ovan continued, "But as such, I do not know the true power of The Rebirth." Even now, he was unable to plant the seed of pain.

"I cannot obtain the ultimate truth," Ryo retorted.

"Hmm."

"The *I* called *you* cannot feel pain," Ryo continued. If Ovan constituted the *Alaya-vijnana*, which had destroyed his image of self, there was no "I" to feel pain. Ovan still had not achieved Enlightenment.

The trickster heaved a heavy sigh. Like Harald, he was already fully aware of that fact.

"Our minds are the greatest mystery for Harald, for us, and for the rest of humanity. There is only the mind. There is no self, but there isn't nothingness either. We've been bound by our worldly desires. We must admit that we are criminals, sentenced to freedom. We must acknowledge others, but we can never see their truth unless we make our hearts one," Ovan stated.

The conversation had restored its flow.

"I—"

"You are Skeith, the archetype for the First Phase. You have inherited the ancient Mother Earth's blood the thickest."

"I constitute the self-*vijnana*. I am the *Atma-graha*—the false image of 'self'—born from Mother Morganna." It didn't matter which way he described himself, for there wasn't much of a discrepancy.

"You are the embodiment of the thoughts Morganna had when she tried to kill her daughter, Aura."

"Morganna awoke her self-conscious with the desire of self-preservation. That's why she tried to prevent the impending birth of the ultimate AI, Aura."

"You were the one who got entangled in the karma of her evil scheme and fell into a coma." Seven years ago, Ryo Misaki had been one of the six Lost Ones in *The World*.

"What constitutes this power?"

"What can this power accomplish?"

"If Skeith is the self-*vijnana*..."

"If Corbenik is the *Alaya-vijnana*..."

"...we'll strike..."

"...each other..."

"...as we are..."

"...with the subconscious screams called *Atma-graha*..."

"...and our absolute truths!"

The World—the universe—was the process of things in a state of flux.

Haseo raised his cross-shaped staff and dashed across the room.

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Splatter!

The white floor rippled like the surface of a lake. Haseo donned the form of his archetype. He had a winged Avatar—he was Haseo the White. The phenomenon behind Skeith had taken that form as a fragment of the mind.

It was a small seed.

The Epitaph User for The Rebirth—the *Alaya-vijnana*—finally greeted the guest he had been waiting for. He was the constantly changing trickster! He was the water that evaded capture.

“Ovan!”

TWO

This was the place where one sympathized with another as their hearts became one.

A countless number of books were scattered across the floor. The room was always a mess whenever I came to visit. Even if I wanted to clean it, the only piece of furniture in this white room was a rocking chair. There wasn't even a bookcase for all these books.

“Harald....?” I repeated, making my young Shadow Warlock PC's lacy skirt flutter. I loved her shoes and their thick soles.

“He's the original creator of The World,” answered a Steam Gunner wearing tinted glasses. He was willing to teach me anything.

“It took a lot of work for me to find this area all on my own,” Dad said proudly through his PC.

I had promised to refer to Dad by his PC name, Ovan, while in The World. He was an adventurer here. I don't know all the details, but apparently

playing online games was part of his job. I wonder what people would think of him earning his salary by gaming. How would I introduce him to everyone at open house at school? Dad was considerably younger than everyone else's parents, so he was bound to stand out. Of course, there was no need to worry about any of that. Dad had never attended open house, nor would he.

"This is where the story about creating a god and all of the wisdom behind The World resides," Ovan explained, spreading out his arms and looking up at the ceiling like an overdramatic actor.

Dad always enjoyed saying stuff that was hard to understand. He was so weird.

"This place will be our little secret," I replied with a loving smile. Saying that made Ovan happy.

I had my PC, Aina, hold a large book in her arms. It was "The Epitaph of Twilight." This large, leather-bound book was like a grimoire. Even my school library didn't have a copy of it. Dad—Ovan—had given me the book on my birthday. There was only one copy of it in all of The World, making it a super rare item.

"Aina, I'm sorry I've put you through so much. You must be lonely," Ovan apologized. Ovan was referring to my PC, not me as his daughter. We both shared the same name.

Loneliness....

Dad was the lonely one here. It wasn't fair the way he made everything my fault and treated me like a kid. Dad moved out and I had to go move in with Mom. Our old house was gone. But we could see each other in The World. It was a special place to me where I could see my dear Dad without Mom finding out. I never get to e-mail him. After all, Mom checks the history on both my computer and my cell phone.

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"We can see each other in The World," I said through Aina. This white room was our secret garden that no one else knew about. Dad was a romantic who loved that sort of stuff.

Ovan ruffled Aina's hair. The Shadow Warlock let him do as he pleased. Even though he wasn't really touching me with his big hands, I was still filled with warmth. The feelings were still there.

"Did you read the book?"

"Yep!" I had been absorbed in "The Epitaph of Twilight."

"That story served as the premise for The World. Since we found it in the Creator's Room, I imagine it's the original copy. This came right out of the author's hands. It's the only bound copy, making it a priceless book."

"But it's in Japanese." It was quite obvious that Emma Wielant was a foreigner. Besides, there wasn't a distinction between an original and a copy if it was typed with some word processing software.

"It's a magical book. The language and grammar changes in accordance with the reader's perception of the book. I'm sure that when you read it, it was the same yet different from when I read it."

"The contents change?"

"The way we interpret it changes." Ovan beamed, proud to have said something complex.

I stuck out my lip and pouted. "I stopped reading it half-way."

The end of "The Epitaph of Twilight" was nothing but blank paper. It just stopped at a really exciting spot. That annoyed me. What happened to Saya and the Waves? How did the story end? What happened to the rest of the story?

"It's incomplete," Ovan said, sounding distraught over his daughter's displeasure. "The author, Emma Wielant, passed away in a car wreck before she

could finish the story."

"I guess it can't be helped then," I responded, feeling bad for her.

Emma couldn't finish telling her story. It was sad that she had passed away. But it was also sad for Saya and everyone in the book who had been left behind. I couldn't really describe it, but it was upsetting to think that the shadowed girl, Saya, and her spirit world would forever tremble before the cursed Waves. They would never be rescued.

"Would you like to know what happens next?" Ovan asked. "Do you want to know what happens at the end of 'The Epitaph of Twilight'?"

"Dad, write it!" I broke my promise and begged Dad, who was there through Ovan.

I had to know.

I want to know. I wanna know. I wanna know! Finish the story! I don't care if that Emma woman writes it or not. I don't care who writes it, as long as it gets written. I don't care if it's someone else's copy, as long as I could read the ending.

"That would be tough. You know I'm not a writer," Ovan said and told a different story instead. It was a long, long story.

Ovan told me a story about a certain boy.

"Kite?"

"That's the name of a boy who became a hero."

I wasn't all that interested in Kite, Wiseman, or even the vivacious BlackRose. I was interested in the characters who had appeared in 'The Epitaph of Twilight.' I liked Helba, Lios and the cursed Waves: Skeith, Innis, Magus, Fidchell, Gorre, Macha, Tarvos and Corbenik. The monstrous Eight Phases of Morganna that attacked Kite had adopted the name of the eight cursed Waves. Then there was Cubia, which was the shadow of Kite's power.

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"Is that the end of 'The Epitaph of Twilight'?"

"It's less like the conclusion and more like an updated version of an old song."

After he said that, he asked with concern, "Does that make sense?"

"Kinda."

"I bet the blank pages in that book," Ovan said and pointed at the leather-bound book Aina held, "are there for people to write their own endings freely."

Emma Wielant had created the basic storyline and background story. Then Harald Hoerwick had turned it into an online game, so everyone in the world could enjoy it. It was akin to Disneyland.

"We can write in it freely?" The thought made my heart flutter.

"That was Kite's turn at the story. That story really did happen in The World."

"So is it my turn since I have the book?" I could continue the story however I wanted. I could become the main character. I could become something even greater than the main character: the narrator. I let my wings of imagination take flight.

That's when the monster appeared.

A monster that resembled a giant worm flopped about as it spewed black bubbles. The monster tore the room apart, baring its beak that split into three pieces. It struck out at Aina with its three-fingered fang, tearing at clothes and flesh alike. It crawled inside of the Shadow Warlock as if it were some sort of parasite. A sign appeared on Aina's tiny chest.

Aina's father simply stood there in shock as the monster noisily chewed Aina up. It was eating her from the inside out. The gluttonous monster then bit savagely into Ovan's left shoulder. He tried to scream out in agony, but all that came out were garish black bubbles.

Haseo stepped forward, his wings spread open behind him. He had been in Avatar Space. The undiscovered Lost Ground had taken him back in time as the images before him showed Ryo the flashback.

What was that...? What did I just see? It had all happened in this very room. The stars of the flashback, the Steam Gunner and Shadow Warlock, were in that same room this very moment.

They're Masato Indou and Aina Indou! Ryo had learned their real names in that glimpse at a fragment of their past.

There wasn't a sign on Aina's chest and she was still able to stand on her own. There wasn't so much as a hint of any hacking done on Ovan's left arm, which was identical to his right arm. That was probably his original default design.

Then there was the monster that had suddenly appeared. The Tri-Edge AIDA had appeared within the black box after breaking through the film that separated this room from elsewhere.

"Aina was the first Lost One," Ovan whispered sadly as he went to stand next to the rocking chair.

"Even before Shino?"

It had happened before Ovan had met Haseo eight months ago. It was back before he had formed the Twilight Brigade.

"The AIDA phenomenon had created victim number zero, of which neither Yata nor CC Corp were aware." Only Ovan had known about Aina, sitting in her rocking chair.

Even a trickster like Ovan couldn't lie now that he had shared

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the inner depths of his heart with Haseo. Ryo had seen the past through those memories. This was a true story that took place back in the days when *The World R:2* was new and Ovan made deals in the Net Slum with his old hacker friends. It occurred at about the same time the first AIDA phenomenon was recorded.

"I was infected with AIDA after that. I didn't go into a coma since this is an Epitaph-PC."

The psychological shock made Ovan awaken to his Avatar. Ovan's right hand held the blessing called Corbenik. He was probably the very first Epitaph User.

The Tri-Edge AIDA wrapped its three feeler-like fingers around its host. It looked as though it was trying to sniff out Ovan's emotions.

In his left hand was a terrible weapon. In his right was a bayonet. The weapon was meant to protect his family. The fatherly image of Ovan had created a distortion in the story. As such, Ovan the trickster was born.

"But you're living together with the very one who put your daughter in a coma," Ryo whispered. Could logic win over emotion? Ryo didn't need to borrow Yata's explanation to know that the only way to destroy AIDA was to first learn about it.

But what about how Ovan felt? If he was Aina's father, wouldn't he pull the trigger and shoot the monster that hurt his daughter? Wouldn't he seek revenge? Wouldn't he do that, even knowing how irrational it was?

"Apparently AIDA had developed an interest in me. That's

when our strange cohabitation began. The Epitaph and AIDA.... While conducting the two conflicting powers that resided within my PC, I—”

“Enough with the crap!”

This was Ovan’s specialty. He worked to annoy whoever he was talking to and take charge of the conversation. Even though he was fully aware of that, Ryo still let himself get provoked. He did it so he could move forward. He needed to draw deeper into the delicate secrets of Ovan’s heart.

“Hmm?”

“Have you obtained the power,” Ryo asked, “to save the Lost Ones? To save her? To save Shino?!” In the end, was this man a friend or foe?

“So, that’s what it all comes to. I like how simple-minded you are,” Ovan said with a smile before turning to look at the white ceiling.

“Answer me!”

“While I studied Harald’s legacy, the black box, the AIDA—oh, in the beginning it wasn’t called AIDA. Naturally, there wasn’t a Tri-Edge yet either. I hypothesized that this network bug was an intelligent virus.”

Data irregularities were a recurrent problem shortly after *The World R:2* was opened to the public. CC Corp’s upper management re-established Project G.U., which had come to a deadlock. Shortly after that, the illegal creature was dubbed the AIDA phenomenon.

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"You were two or three steps ahead of everyone before Yata even took over G.U."

"The situation demanded it of me," Ovan answered. Ovan studied how his Avatar's Data Drain operated while he gathered AIDA samples from all across *The World*. Both AIDA and the Morganna Factor were new to him.

"I eliminated various types of AIDA samples with my Avatar. But I was still unable to delete the one that had infected Aina. Perhaps it had developed immunity to Corbenik when it infected my PC. At any rate, I found it rather doubtful that Aina's mind resided in her PC.

"Even if I could eliminate the AIDA, I had no way of knowing if doing so could help a Lost One could regain consciousness. I was the only fully awakened Epitaph User. Even though I had obtained power, I was still ignorant. That in turn made me powerless. Everyone around me didn't even realize that they were ignorant of Aina's plight."

It was just like how no one knew or cared to acknowledge that Shino had been put into a coma by an online game. Ovan was just like Haseo, who delved into his solitude as he went solo.

"I lamented my fate. But there was something I had to do before I could start theorizing about various things. I had to make a goal. I used all of Harald's knowledge in this black box to mirror Kite's fight from seven years ago. I wanted to use the power of the goddess Aura, who controlled *The World's* autonomy with her ultimate AI. Surely she could remove the AIDA fang that had

pierced into my daughter. I had to remove the poisoned arrow first and foremost."

"Where there's a will, there's a way."

If Ovan thought he caught on to something, he had to pursue it.

"But Aura had already gone into hiding by that point," Ryo said, reflecting back on the Banshouya Files. All that was left of her were the Epitaph fragments that had broken into eight pieces.

"That's precisely why—"

"You created the Twilight Bridge!" They were his companions on his quest to find Aura and save his daughter.

Ovan's expression was of one seeking Enlightenment as he reflected on how resolute he was in the past. "According to Emma Wielant's 'Epitaph of Twilight,' that book on Aina's lap, there should have been other Epitaph Users besides myself. It wouldn't have surprised me."

Epitaph Users were drawn to one another. If a little blue bird that was still out of sight was going to come scrounging for food, it was important to leave the window of possibility open. That must have proved quite the adventure for this eccentric man.

Even though it was just an online game, Ovan called himself a Guild Master and gave himself a position of power. He invited people he'd never met into his guild and then made them obey him. He wasn't trying to be weird. That was simply the only way Masato Indou knew how to fulfill his role as leader.

"But my journey reached a dead-end."

Ovan had competed with his rivals at G.U. But neither

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reason nor experience could enlighten him to the truth. God was dead.

"Aina passed away," Ovan said suddenly, his voice as dark as shadow that knew no end.

"What?!" Ryo staggered back in shock.

"Aina was the first Lost One. To my knowledge, as far as this story is concerned she is also the first casualty."



Ryo gasped in surprise. A Lost One had passed away. Now that Ovan mentioned it, he realized it was impossible for no one to have died throughout all of this. He had just never thought of it. It wasn't natural to think a game could kill someone. People didn't even try to imagine that sort of stuff. He had accidentally overlooked the normally preposterous concept.

"When did it happen?" Ryo shouted.

"Half a year ago."

It had happened one winter day. It was the exact same day Ryo had met Shino offline. Somewhere in the world, the pulse in Aina Indou's young body had come to a stop.

Masato Indou's daughter, Aina, was dead. She had entered the world of death, after which her body was cremated and turned to ash. Her ash and bones were buried under stone.

Ryo had never come in contact with a person who had lost a loved one before. He was unsure what to say next, plunging into pure silence.

"I couldn't attend my daughter's funeral. No, even if I was allowed to, I couldn't have fulfilled my obligation as her father and served as the chief mourner. I was too scared," Masako whispered, his voice dripping with despair. Ovan stood with his head hung low.

Ryo thought back on the memories of the past he had caught a glimpse of in Avatar Space.

"We can see each other in The World," Aina had said.

The World was the only place where this father and child could be together. They saw each other in this white garden, making sure to keep it a secret from the rest of the world.

"You...."

"Out of respect for my family, I won't go into any more detail about the Indou family affairs and my daughter's death. If you're curious, you can look it up later. You should be able to draw a fairly accurate account of everything that's happened if you connect the dots. Of course, it will be different from my view of the truth." This was probably the first time Ovan had made it so painfully clear to Haseo that his lips were sealed.

Why had Aina died?

"It doesn't matter if she died because of war, sickness, an accident, suicide or murder. It doesn't matter if a gun, a knife or poison killed her. It doesn't even matter if the cause of death was unknown. The fact of the matter is that there is nothing more devastating for a father than the loneliness felt after losing a daughter. The most glorious part of a person's life is bringing a

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child into this world." Ovan added with a dollop of sarcasm and superiority, "That is something you can't understand quite yet."

Daughter. Ryo was surprised by his own ignorance when he felt the depth and weight Ovan put into that word.

Ovan stroked Aina's hair as she sat upon the rocking chair. "Seeing my daughter as just an empty shell became unbearable. I had lost my ray of light. The darkness of despair was torture for me. I trembled with resentment as Death knocked on our door. Eventually I toppled, no longer able to fight back. I quickly crumbled for my powerlessness had made my mind lose its sharp edge.

"I felt as if someone had torn open my chest. The pain in my heart was so great it made me cough up blood. I wanted to escape. I threw myself before a woman in my desire for salvation. I went to Shino...."

It had been easy for Ovan to find out that Shino had been in Hulle Granz Cathedral.

"That's when I was going to meet up with Shino," Ryo whispered with realization. It was just after Shino had gently turned him down in the real world. Ryo had planned to give it one more shot, this time as Haseo in *The World*.

Ryo had planned to gloss over his failure in the real world and somehow mend their relationship. He remembered how desperate he felt as he carefully planned what he would say. His words were like a bouquet of dried flowers.

But Shino would never again smile for him.

When Haseo reached the cathedral, Shino was gone.

There was a glowing blood red sign on the altar that looked as if it had just been carved. If he could turn back time the way one rewound a tape, he would see that Ovan—the real Tri-Edge—had been there.

“I bore open my heart and confessed to Shino,” Ovan’s player continued.

“You what?!” Ryo’s heart shook to the very core. He had sensed Shino’s trust for Ovan back in their Brigade days. Ryo had been filled with jealousy every time Shino shared an expression with Ovan that she had never shared with Haseo. Ovan had done the same with her.

“Your expression says everything.”

“Ugh!” Ryo was brimming with the fire of embarrassment, making Haseo’s face turn bright red.

“The relationship between men and women isn’t restricted to romance, kiddo. The boy-meets-girl scenario isn’t everything. Not every romance starts out with a boy and girl hanging out together until one of them finally gets dopey-eyed and confesses his love. It would be rather boring if everyone had to follow that protocol to fall in love.

“*Confessing* means to share an embarrassing secret with someone. I had gone to make a confession. But the goddess I sought wasn’t on the altar, so I confessed to Shino instead. I thought my broken heart would shatter if I didn’t tell someone. As you said earlier, a person only confesses when they are feeling overwhelmed.

“But I must say, describing Shino as a saint doesn’t seem to

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match considering she had a dark side to her," Ovan said teasingly, showing just how close he felt to Shino. Ovan always talked about a side of Shino that Ryo had never seen.

"What did Shino say?" How had Shino responded when Ovan told her the truth about his daughter?

"She didn't forgive, admonish or comfort me. The clever woman simply remained silent." Shino had understood that all Ovan wanted was someone to listen to him. She knew that he didn't expect to find the answer to the AIDA problem through her. And it wasn't like she could bring his dead daughter back to life. All she could do was silently listen to a lonely man's confession.

"She had sentenced me to freedom. And when we were finished, she simply uttered, 'The Twilight Brigade should continue its journey.'"

"Shino cared for—"

"She didn't abandon me, even after hearing my confession."

Shino reminded Ryo of how Reiko had embraced him. She reminded him of his friends. When Shino had gently turned him down back on that winter day, Ryo had deluded himself into thinking he was the victim. Shino was the one who had been truly hurt.

"Why did you PK Shino?" Ryo shouted, his emotions boiling over.

That was the only part of this story that didn't make sense. Ryo knew the truth behind the irregular Steam Gunner's left arm. He knew about Aina. He knew how things had fallen for Ovan. He had even learned the name of Ovan's player when he saw a glimpse

of the past. There was only one missing link left in this story.

What was the real truth behind Ovan—Masato Indou?

“Out of all I’ve said, *that’s* what you’re hung up on?” Ovan replied lightly, despite having just been yelled at.

“What do you mean?”

“I behaved just as everyone else you’ve seen thus far. AIDA nests within the loss we feel in our hearts. You’ve seen that loss in the form of a cat, a big brother, a big sister, oneself, dreams for the future and a woman. AIDA gains indirect control over the players when it breaks us from the bonds of reason.

“It is believed that there are some parasites that control their host. For example, the aquatic Gordian worm grows inside of an insect host. Once it’s fully developed, it forces the host to into a pool of water, where the insect then dies.

“Although I don’t know all the details, it’s believed that the Gordian worm secretes certain chemicals that induce suicidal behavior in the host. It is well-known that certain chemical agents are transmitted between synapses in our brains. Adrenaline, dopamine, and endorphin are just a couple examples. These chemicals are synthesized and regulated by electric signals.

“Everything used to develop human thought—our senses, sensory perception, emotions, and feelings—aren’t as special as people would like to believe. It isn’t sacred territory impenetrable to science. We can already explain things fairly decently, to say the least. It would certainly be possible for an electric bug to make our brains perceive various illusions.

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"My heart was in a horribly weakened state, which allowed the AIDA to easily devour me from the inside."

The Tri-Edge AIDA had wriggled out of Ovan's left shoulder. It looked as though it had transformed into a Gordian worm, breaking out of its host's stomach. By the time Ovan realized what had happened, Shino lay dead in front of the altar.

"My inner monster had broken free from its cage on my left arm and devoured Shino," the trickster answered.

That was how Ovan had lost Shino. When he heard Haseo's footsteps, he made himself scarce. That was the full story encompassing how Ovan had PKed Shino before vanishing without a trace.

"What the hell?" Ryo shouted, exploding with vexation. "Why did the AIDA PK Shino?"

"I don't remember. Do you examine every single one of your emotions?" Ovan asked back.

"Ngh!"

"I'd tell you to ask the AIDA if you're all that curious, but it won't do you any good. My Avatar was a reflection of the Aina-shaped emptiness in my heart. But that emptiness was buried together with Aina's ashes and bones when she died in the real world. Not even emptiness remains once everything is lost.

"Aina's PC sitting here in this rocking chair transformed from a ray of hope into remnants of despair. My feelings of loss that should have been buried with her turned into thorns of pain that stabbed at me every time I saw her. Everything in my story was

turned upside down. That's when the parasite dug a new hole in which to nest."

"It dug a hole by PKing Shino? Was that your new loss?" Ryo cried out.

"If Shino had never been hospitalized, neither you nor I could have come this far. My left arm represents the Shino-shaped emptiness inside of me!" Ovan screamed as he threw the monster residing on his left shoulder into plain view.

To Ryo, that arm represented sorrow.

Ovan had sent Shino white daisies.

Throughout these past six months, Ovan had suffered just as Ryo had. The karma developed throughout that time was what allowed Ryo to stand in the black box as he was now. He was here holding his cross-shaped staff as the First Phase, The Terror of Death, Skeith.

"I had become a recluse, hiding within myself back when I was the PKK, the Terror of Death. I had shut myself away from the world back when I became a student frequenting Balbol Museum."

Half a year had passed since then. Ovan had stored up a great deal of wisdom before resurfacing as the intellectual trickster.

HASEO.

The very first thing Ovan had done was contact someone dear to him.

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HE'S GOING TO APPEAR TODAY. YOU KNOW THE PLACE.

That simple line served to ensnarl Haseo's story with Ovan's. Ovan was simply trying to achieve his goal. He had made the eight Epitaph Users fight amongst each other. Ovan had wailed over the corpse-filled story that took place in the Inverted City Megin Fi for he had been trying to bind the power to create one's own story in *The World*.

"I will become a god. I must."



The truth would be made clear. When Ovan and Haseo opened the doors to their memories, their inner truths would be brought to the light.

"Only a fool allows the story to end with despair. At the very least, it isn't fitting for a beast of intelligence such as me to hurt myself by painting the world around me with the absolute darkness of despair," Ovan said.

Ovan had made a vow to himself. He would do this on his own. He would risk his life on this measly online game. He would sacrifice his life in the real world for a mere online game. He had no basis for which to do so. He had no proof.

It didn't matter who laughed at him. He didn't care about those who dared laugh at him. Haseo and Ovan were just alike.

“The six others—Atoli, Kuhn, Yata, Sakubo, Endrance and Pi—they constituted the five basic senses and the sixth sense. They could create their own stories and bring them to an end. They could each write about their own self-consciousness, which they left open for everyone to see, anyway.

“But you and I are different. So long as we constitute the self-*vijnana* and the *Alaya-vijnana*, the main story must be about our subconscious minds! It was inevitable that the story would turn out this way,” Ovan declared as an information window opened over his head.

The window showed a video of Harald Hoerwick before he passed away. It was the first time Ryo had ever seen a movie of him. The film didn’t show whoever was recording him with their personal camera. It was obvious that the cameraman was an amateur who wasn’t very comfortable with the camera yet.

“Who recorded this?”

“Are you curious?”

The video should have been about ten years old, but it felt as though Ryo was watching a scratched-up, hundred-year old film. It was an odd sensation.

“I never imagined him to be such a bashful guy,” Ryo answered. Someday this man would be acclaimed a genius, yet the wrinkly old AI engineer acted like a young boy on film.

“I don’t know who recorded him. But the only person Harald, the weirdo of the age, would open his heart to was his beloved Emma Wielant.”

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Ryo could see the ocean through the window in the video. The blue was the color of the Mediterranean Sea.

“Harald Hoerwick,” Ovan changed his tone before continuing. “What was Harald Hoerwick trying to accomplish when he made a massive MMORPG the stage for the next age of networks that would ruin the twilight of the gods? He used the tool of communication to link our common grounds as he tried to grasp onto the ever-expanding number of dimensions. That’s where the Morganna System came into play.

“Harald had over twenty million players to serve as samples. It resulted in dividing lines that separated a vast number of dimensions. It’s almost impossible for a human immersed in the third dimension to comprehend the ultimate AI, Aura.

“She’s like an extremely angular shape that lacks angles. She’s flat like a sphere. She’s squiggly like a straight line. Her front becomes her back, making her constantly flip front and back. It is difficult to comprehend her as any one distinct form.

“The differing number of views that compose an object are called variables. You learned about them in middle school. If it’s a 3-dimensional object, then there’s a vertical plane, a horizontal plane and height. These variables are represented by X, Y, and Z, which allows us to determine an object’s 3D coordinates.

“Now then, how many dimensions does *The World* have? You could claim that it’s 2D since it’s shown on your display screen. Even though it’s 2D, it’s designed to give the appearance of being 3D. But what is the fourth dimension?” Ovan spoke quickly as he

fired out his question.

Ryo said the first thing that popped into his mind, "Time?"

"That's one possibility. Time is irreversible as it constantly plunges forward toward the future. It's a physical quantity that lacks any particularly special traits. But the fourth dimension doesn't have to be time.

"Let's consider this. There are some flat entities that live in the second dimension. They were researching an even greater dimension—the third dimension. The second dimension is composed of the horizontal and vertical planes, so we could assume that the third dimension should be height. But the flat entities relied on their common sense, which dictated that the third variable should be time. Their answer for the third dimension was the same as yours for the fourth."

"Are these 2D people our PCs?" Ryo didn't really comprehend any of this, but much to his surprise, he thought he understood what Ovan was getting at.

"They could be if you liked. In that case, *The World* as it plugs on through time will serve as the plane. The variables could be heat (in Joules) or temperature (in degrees Celsius). The colors you adjusted to your display screen—tint, brightness and saturation—could form its own independent 3D world. There's no need to limit ourselves to 3D worlds composed of the vertical plane, the horizontal plane and height. It could be anything as long as it's mathematically calculable.

"Frankly put, there's an nth amount of variables. There's as many variables as there are view points. As such, *The World* could

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be a world composed of innumerable dimensions.” Anything that had been given a numeric value in the digital world could create a dimension.

“Even my PC?” There were over ten parameters in one PC—one dimensional body.

“I had embarked on an intellectual journey to find what I believed to be the ultimate AI in *The World*. I was searching for the goddess’s coordinates. There was a chance that the goddess didn’t reside in a field, town or anywhere that would show up on a map. I couldn’t limit my search to various word combinations at a Chaos Gate.

“That’s how the Twilight Brigade had searched for her. Although it’s not entirely impossible to find her that way, it was highly unlikely. There is no goddess on the altar in Hulle Granz Cathedral. Information written on 2D paper in a strategy guide would prove worthless.

“God is dead. She has been since Ovan deleted Aura from my problem. Aura’s existence stopped being the anticipated answer to my problem within the dimension of the Epitaph User for The Rebirth. Whether she exists or not will have little influence on me now.

“Time is irreversible, so I can’t go back in time to meet Aura. Thus the goddess lost her power. My story led me to the variables I needed for my future. I suppose you could say that I broke the variable called Aura into eight separate pieces.”

Ovan had divided her into eight variables.

"You mean the Morganna Factors?"

"This is a large story that encompasses all eight of the factors, including myself. The story can reach a single conclusion once the eight threads of karma have been intertwined. It must!"

That was how Ovan would become a god like Aura, yet different at the same time. That's why he had spun Haseo into his story, melding him into it.

"Does *The World R:2* have twelve million dimensions?" Ryo asked.

"There could be twenty million dimensions, or even more than that," Ovan answered. It was like the dimensions were signals traveling through space.

"Are there as many dimensions as there are players?"

"There's an infinite number of dimensions. Our world is composed of the Internet and the real world, making it endless. But that would make it ridiculously difficult to live out our lives.

"I imagine Harald set everything to operate mostly automatically through the Morganna System. Although describing it as a system that samples human thought sounds simple enough, just how many variables does it require to properly equate a single human's mind? The way Harald was able to apply numerical values to human thought proves he was a genius. The black box is a mysterious device. Even I couldn't figure it out.

"To figure it out requires super-dimensional arithmetic since the equation is twenty million times the number of variables designated to sample a single mind."

"That's humanly impossible," Ryo said.

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"That's why Harald entrusted the math to Morganna. He was running out of time," Ovan said, repeating a line he had used more than once.

"Hmm."

"I'm running out of time. In fact, I'm even shorter on time than Harald was. I had to limit my search for the goddess to a mere few dimensions."

"The Eight Phases...."

"I limited the number of dimensions to eight and had the eight Epitaph Users split the calculations. Now, at long last my testimony has brought me here."

"We're the last two left...," Ryo whispered as he made Haseo silently get into a fighting stance.

Ovan sounded as though he was climbing up the last stretch of stairs as he continued, "I said once before that our form is of little importance. It doesn't matter if these are Avatars, spirits possessing us, or the Eight Phases. Don't you see? It wasn't truly irrelevant. The variables had meaning because they change."

"God is dead, but I'm not referring specifically to Aura's death. By excluding the only established god from the thesis, the eight Morganna Factors were able to each become their own respective dimension. They each became a world in and of themselves. They became gods. As such, I was able to use my mind to transform this world into a piece of my story, just as Kite did."

"Like the hero Kite?"

"That's right. But neither you nor I could ever become heroes."

Ovan smiled bitterly, as if the mere thought of becoming a hero seemed tiresome. Ryo was surprised to find he felt the same.

"We're not the type," Ryo responded. Ryo had never thought about wanting to be called a hero. He didn't care if people called him a hero, a genius, a god or whatever. Ryo was surprised to see a look of relief flash across Ovan's eyes under those tinted glasses.

"The seeds stored within us Epitaph Users are terribly tainted. They were enemies to the pure-hearted hero. They are like the blood that bathed Aura when she broke free from Morganna's womb. They are like the blood Aura spilt when she threw herself in front of the hero Kite's blade and awoke as the ultimate AI. They are like the dead body under the sal tree's Nirvana.

"We have the most human-like traits out of all those who were sampled. That is why we are the eight Epitaph Users. We are less like a part of Aura's power and more like an umbilical cord that used to connect the child to the womb. We were garbage, cut off for the good of the world."

"I'm fine with being garbage," Ryo retorted. Haseo's wings fluttered as he shifted positions.

"Originally, someone beautiful like a hero was supposed to include us Eight Phases in his magnificent saga. Yet even so, we sought to become the main subject matter in the story. This should never have happened. I believe we could say that you in particular are being forced to repent for the sins from your previous life.

"All of us are mere humans, not great heroes. This is the very

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source of our problems. This dark and empty story has made us crawl through mud."

No matter how long the story continued, it never drew to an end. Should the story come to an end, it would not create a poem as rhythmic and balanced as the miraculous symphony about the hero Kite of seven years ago. It would be a spiraling story that forced people to feel despair as they sympathized with how humiliating life could be.

"Does it matter?" Ryo asked. He accepted things as they were.

"You're right. We've come this far, so let's keep things simple. It's not until we reach the end that we realize we should have done so since the beginning."

Ovan's right hand held a bayonet and his left a monster.

Haseo clutched onto the cross-shaped staff that symbolized his archetype.

I'M RIGHT HERE.

The voice from seven years ago overlapped with Haseo's voice. Ryo's lost past had created the torrent called Haseo. That was why he existed in this world. That was why the world existed. He acknowledged his own existence. Wasn't that how everything began? It started the moment a baby wailed for the first time upon its birth.

Ryo would not look away.

"I'm right here!" Ryo repeated.

"That's self-evident," Ovan replied.

Everyone was a criminal sentenced to freedom.

"So what if God's dead? That's why we care about those dear to us! That's what makes our feelings so important! I'm right here and I'm going to live through this for someone else!"

After all, Ryo wasn't a hero. If having *Atma-graha*—a false self-image—was supposed to be humiliating.... If growing up was supposed to be humiliating....

Then it was humiliating to be alive.



"You're beautiful," Ovan said with a smile, "even if you're not a hero. Even if you're not a legendary warrior. Even if you don't obtain something from all of this that others would envy."

"I wish you made sense!" Ryo said with a sigh aimed at Ovan's strange demeanor.

"But your beauty is also dangerous. Those wings only serve as a guide for the boy wavering between the border of two realms. They are also a force that won't allow you to stay in one place. Whether you like it or not, you will lose those wings once you wield Skeith's power. You'll lose them soon," Ovan said. "You were the one running out of time."

"What do you want?" Ryo asked. He would not compromise as the end loomed ever closer.

"I abandoned all desire. I will use my power's abilities."

"What did you write for the end of your story?"

THE REBIRTH II

"Aina and Shino smiling." Ovan wrapped the AIDA's fang that nested within the Shino-shaped emptiness in his arm around the neck of the girl sitting in the rocking chair.

"They were happy?" At long last Ryo had learned the truth about Ovan.

"I collapsed under the death of my daughter and have been embraced by the very AIDA that killed Shino. I was trying to resurrect Aina."

Aina Indou's body was destroyed half a year ago. But the black box had sampled Aina's thread of karma and her memories—the memories formed when Ovan and Aina lived together in *The World*. She should have turned into a seed and melted into the *Alaya-vijnana* referred to as *The World*.

Ryo's glimpse of the memories that took place in this white room were of AIDA PKing Aina. Those memories hadn't belonged to Masato, but to Aina.

"This is ... The Rebirth's ... true power!"

Aura had been dear to Harald the way Aina had been dear to Ovan. Although their situations were worlds apart and they existed on completely different dimensions, it didn't change the fact that their journey had begun in the name of the ones they loved the most.

"Would Aina smile ... if she saw ... you like this?" Ryo whispered weakly.

"I'd feel better if she cried if she's still an expressionless doll. My only regret is that I won't be there when that happens." In order

to create the *Alaya-vijnana*, Masato had to destroy his *Atma-graha*—he had to destroy himself.

“I won’t be reborn anew. I will never hold the fruit of truth. Blood and amniotic fluid will form the *Alaya-vijnana*—the Eight Phase. The Shino-shaped AIDA will form the flesh. There is both wine and bread. All that’s left is the baptism. The First Phase, Haseo, shall bequeath her name,” Ovan said.

“Skeith!”

“‘The Terror of Death.’ That was the first thing Morganna Mode Gone had given Aura. Aura could not be born just because Morganna had been impregnated. Until she consciously felt the terror of death, she could not be born into the spiritual world.”

That was Skeith’s power. It was the self-*vijnana* and the subconscious *Atma-graha*—the false image one had of oneself. It was truly the Terror of Death. Those two names represented it perfectly.

“I....”

“Haseo, please tell my beautiful doll.... Tell her about the karma that turned into a seed. Tell Aina her name.”

“But I....”

“The key doesn’t think about how to open a lock when told to do so,” Ovan said, as if guiding Haseo one last time.

The two Factors were finally tied together when they struck out at each other, accepting each other as they were.



THE REBIRTH II

The Rebirth had been activated.

Ryo could feel the wind blowing up at him and through his wings. The winged boy swung about his cross-shaped staff in vain. He looked like a fallen angel drenched in sin.

If I, he suddenly thought, If I melt into the light, can I become a hero free of guilt?

"Everyone furrowed their brows at the sight of your ugliness. You were rejected. No one wanted to deal with you. No one wanted you. You, the Terror of Death, were forced to dance like a fool as they mocked you and scorned you. Even the parents that gave birth to you silently abandoned you.

"Just when you were about to deny your own existence, I took you in. I never left your side," Ovan said. He had fulfilled his vow. He had stomped on the briar's thorns with his heels in this deceitful, sadistic, vomit-drenched world that was as distorted as a pearl.

"That's how we..."

"...reached the end of our story together."

A moment later, Ryo could no longer hold onto the body of the disintegrating irregular Steam Gunner's body.

Ovan said, "If growth is noble, then she'll try to move forward and walk on her own. I hope that's true. For if it is, then the Six Paths of loss are also noble. We don't need her to be born the Tathagata. If death is the most noble of things, wouldn't it be shameful to only look at the end result of the 5.67 billion years it took to become a Buddha? Of course, that's also a part of life.

"At the very least, don't become the shark that devours the entire fish that the old man reeled in. It would be better if you became the worn-out old fisherman, who dragged the bones up the cliff."

"I've read Hemmingway." Hemmingway was an author who loved six-fingered cats.

"In the end, he put a rifle up to his head and pulled the trigger." He had probably dreamed of a lion, just as the old fisherman had.

"I wonder if he wanted to become strong," Ryo whispered, which made Ovan smile.

There was no turning back time.

The trickster chanted for the last time, "Oh, subconscious images of myself, come and devour me. I shall be like a rabbit throwing itself into the fire, turning into food for the starving travelers. Eat me to your heart's content. If we only see things as we want to see them, continue to watch me so that you may forget what has happened. You may go wherever you wish.

"Come to think about it, my entire journey was to—"

The Rebirth had been activated. At long last Ovan had found the Key of the Twilight. There were as many signs leading to the truth as there were human emotions. Maurice Maeterlinck's Blue Bird of Happiness was about to take flight.

The Rebirth had been activated.

All of the power needed to create their story turned into a spell.

"It's time to wake up, Aina."

THE REBIRTH II



The area was flooded with light. Haseo flapped his wings frantically as he fell from *The World's* most holy of grounds together with a shower of shooting stars.

OVAN....

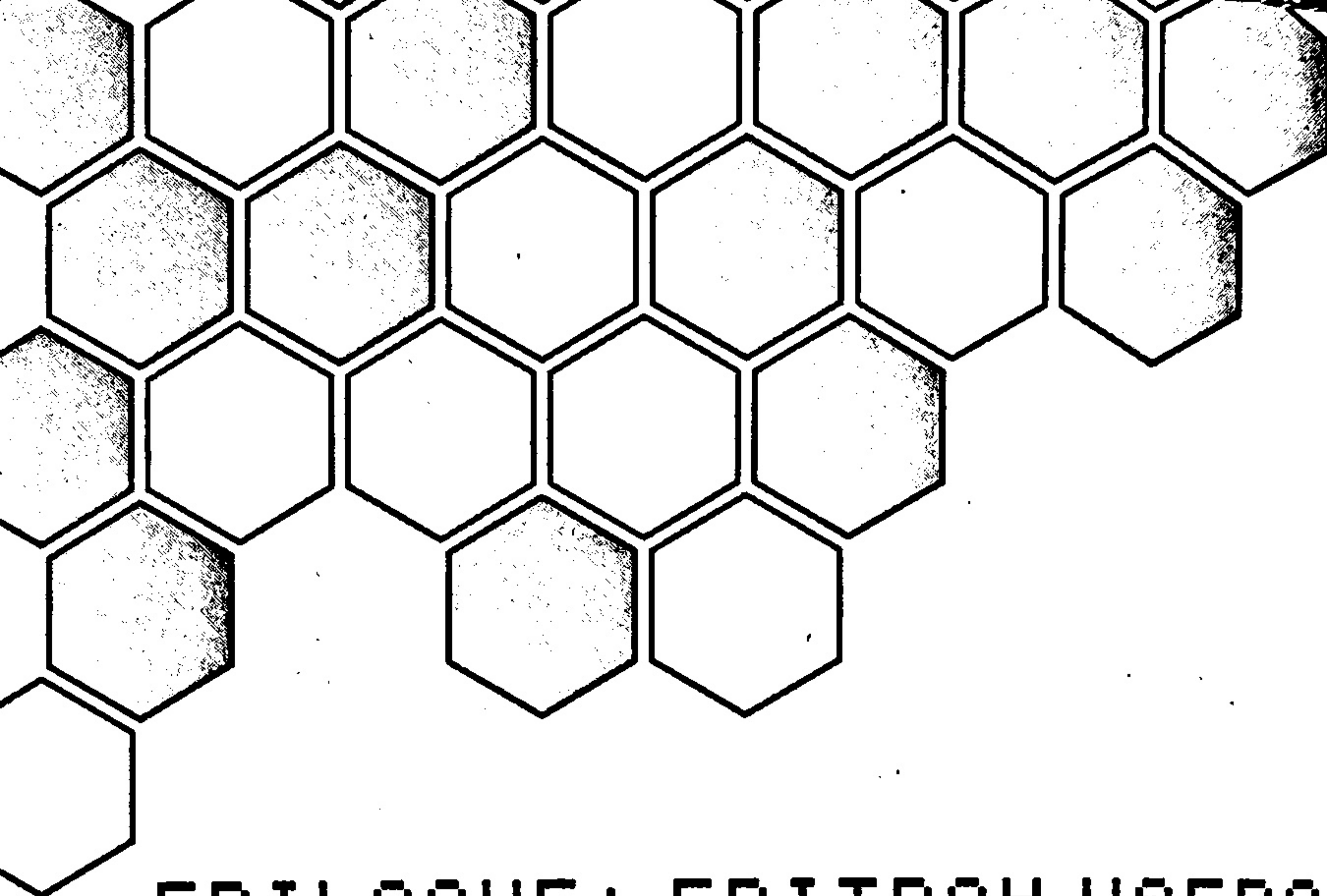
The man Ryo had respected could no longer answer him. He knew that after touching Ovan's heart, but he was still terribly sad.

HASEO....

Ryo's heart linked anew with someone else. Just below him, he could see his friends, who had waited for him at the Navel of the Lake outside Hulle Granz Cathedral. Kuhn's one green eye was shining. Sakubo was crying out in joy. Endrance slowly looked up at the sky. Yata finally broke free from the piece of parchment paper. Pi held her arms out to welcome Haseo back. Atoli, the Harvest Cleric, screamed out the name of the boy she had touched more deeply than any other.

This was *The World*.

As gravity lightly pushed Haseo down toward the ground, his face reflected Ryo's heart. Haseo looked as though he was brimming with happiness.



EPILOGUE: EPITPAH USERS

The incident's resolution was in sight.

Media coverage indicated that the series of network abnormalities had come to a halt, though it was something most people realized on their own. It was undeniable that the online troubles were calming down. The problem with the irregular strain on the CC Corp server had been resolved. Of course, the AIDA virus's existence was never made public.

AIDA had completely vanished from *The World R:2*. The unknown virus had vanished from the face of the earth as suddenly as the dinosaurs. That was the only thing CC Corp's upper management was willing to confirm.



EPITPAH USERS

SEPTEMBER

Ryo Misaki and Reiko Saeki were visiting the hospital.

"The Rebirth was the core of the black box. It was truly part of the device meant to create the ultimate AI, Aura," Saeki whispered once Ryo finished telling her about his last conversation with Ovan.

"If the Eighth Phase really was the *Alaya-vijnana*, then it was meant to store the player's minds it had sampled as seeds," Ryo responded.

Ryo was wearing his school uniform since he had dropped by on his way home from school. His darkly tanned classmates had teased him over being so pale after summer break.

"So it was the land of memories."

"Or maybe a water-like fertile soil ... or something," Ryo suggested. Ryo didn't truly comprehend the majority of the conversation he had shared with Ovan in that white room.

"It was the land where the ceremony to recreate the ultimate AI from the player's thoughts that had been transformed into numeric values was to take place," Reiko said, a look of consternation on her face.

The Morganna Mode Gone System was truly the black box. It had made Harald Hoerwick worthy of the right to be called a genius. Neither Reiko nor Ovan were capable of fully analyzing that ceremony.

"Ovan successfully conducted an experiment based off of

Harald's theories, using the eight Morganna Factors as substitutes."

"The first through seventh Phases must have sampled a whole bunch of player's minds," Ryo whispered. Those seven Phases administered the five basic senses and the conscious mind. They were the senses and the perception thereof as well as the ensuing emotion.

"Kuhn and I are segments of the conscious mind, right? And then the Eighth Phase was like a womb." The Eighth Phase was like a small universe floating in amniotic fluid.

Ovan had tried to use The Rebirth to give birth to....

"I confirmed that a girl named Aina Indou did indeed pass away half a year ago," Reiko said, filling Ryo in on the results of the investigation CC Corp had conducted after the incident was over. "Aina Indou had been in a vegetative state for a long period of time. The timeframe she first fell unconscious coincides with the beginning of the AIDA phenomenon."

Aina Indou had been infected toward the beginning of 2016. Around that time, Takumi Hino was still living in the Net Slum as Yata and Reiko Saeki wasn't working for CC Corp yet. When the AIDA phenomenon had first begun, it was considered an unidentifiable data anomaly. The ongoing series of illegal phenomenon occurring in *The World* was not coined the AIDA virus until shortly after Project G.U. was re-established under Yata.

"But if she died half a year ago...."

"Aina wasn't on CC Corp's list of those connected to the AIDA incident. As a result, CC Corp was unable to investigate Masato Indou and discover that he was the player for the illegal

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hacker, Ovan."

Masato Indou was an investigator for NAB. As a result, CC Corp was unable to identify Ovan's player until after the incident was over.

"He was an information spy."

"We received a response from NAB regarding Masato. Supposedly he was dismissed from NAB half a year ago," Reiko said.

"So they cut their ties with him." Ryo sighed.

NAB had insisted that they were currently unrelated to a hacker who conducted illegal behavior.

"The truth has been buried."

There was no way to confirm if NAB's assertion was legitimate. Masato Indou's existence was fading away in both the game and in the real world. Even though they knew his real name, they had been unable to locate him in the real world. They couldn't find him and confirm whether he was dead or alive.

"You don't think...?" Could the same thing have happened to Ovan that happened to Yata when he became parchment paper? Could he share the fate of Harald Hoerwick? Was he no longer sitting with snacks and a can of cola next to him? Had Masato Indou's mind left his body and begun living in *The World* back when he stopped sending Shino flowers? It was impossible to say. The pit of Ryo's stomach grew cold with the realization that he couldn't deny the possibility.

"Why did Aina die?" Ryo asked, wanting to know her cause of death. Ovan had told Ryo to find out on his own if he was curious.

Even now, that nagged at him.

Reiko looked down and answered in a small voice, "Euthanasia."

"Ah!" Ryo gasped in surprise.

Euthanasia had been legalized in Japan just a few years ago. There were arguments for and against it from the medical, ethical, and economic perspectives. Nonetheless, a patient could be euthanized if he met certain requirements and both he and his doctor gave their signatures of approval. If the patient fell into a vegetative state, making it impossible to discern his wishes, a family member would have to make the call.

"When Aina's mother was told there was no hope of recovery, she asked the doctors to euthanize Aina. There was nothing modern medicine could do for her since AIDA had caused the coma. After she filled out all the legal paperwork, certain medicine was added to the intravenous drip, euthanizing Aina Indou."

It was an ethical act that seemed commonsense in Japan.

"What about Masato? There's no way he'd let that happen," Ryo nearly shouted, but quickly lowered his voice when he remembered he was in a hospital.

"Masato had lost his parental authority over his daughter," Reiko answered. "He had separated from his wife and was mediating divorce. He was legally prohibited from coming into contact with his daughter. It looked like he fought against the divorce, but signed all the paperwork after his daughter's death."

"*We can see each other in The World,*" Aina's voice repeated in Ryo's head. They could see each other in *The World*.... It was the only

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place where they could see each other.

"So he was a failed father?"

"There were problems with his conduct. He got married young. In fact, he was younger than me when he got married. He drifted from one job to the next, hardly ever dropping by the house...." Reiko trailed off, ending in a mumble.

Ryo hadn't expected anything great out of Ovan's life in the real world. Yet it didn't stop him from having mixed feelings after hearing about the sorry state of Ovan's life in the real world. After all, this was the life of the man he had once respected.

Masato Indou had been commonly known as a strange person, but then he got branded as someone maladjusted to family life because he had lost his rights as a father. As such, Masato had been sentenced to death as far as society was concerned. The real life powers called the "law" had stolen his daughter away from him and killed him.

"*I'm running out of time,*" Ovan had said. He had also said that Ryo was the one running out of time. Had he been referring to the possibility that Shino would die because her body was growing increasingly gaunter from her never-ending sleep? Or had he been afraid that Ryo's will was coming dangerously close to breaking?

The horribly dried white daisies sitting in their little vase in the hospital room represented hope. Had they been that inept man's attempt to console Shino and Ryo?

"Ovan...."

Masato had been unable to protect the one dearest to him. He

had tried to bury his loss in the real world through *The World*, just as the other Epitaph Users had. Masato had created his PC, Ovan. But it was undeniably the PC who moved the player who had just suffered the loss of his daughter. Ovan existed on a higher plane than Masato through his virtual persona. Ovan was Masato's inner archetype. It was his "self."

"He loved his daughter," Reiko whispered.

"He just didn't know how to show it," Ryo responded. That's why he had no choice but to live a life no one wanted.

"Ryo, Haseo was the Key of the Twilight for Ovan." That was true even if the story was all about that trickster.

"But I couldn't save Ovan," Ryo whispered with a sunken heart.

"Masato fulfilled his desires. For him, that was the greatest salvation out there."

"It's not easy for my heart to understand that." Ryo was still filled with remorse.

It was foolish to force one's views and image of salvation onto another simply because they didn't like the person. But even so, Ryo imagined that there had to have been some other answer. He couldn't help but feel an unmoving sense of regret.

"Misaki," Reiko said as she looked Ryo in the eyes, "Masato knew how you felt. After all, Ovan let you name his beloved daughter. Masato may have been waiting for his story to draw to this ending."

"My Skeith...."

"The First Phase formed the self-*vijnana*. It was the seed of

EPITPAH USERS

self-awareness that had formed in Morganna through her desire for self-preservation. The Rebirth never could have happened without Haseo."

Fate's wheel had started turning seven years ago.

The hero Kite was not the one who had turned into the archetype for the First Phase, Skeith. Instead it had been a Twin Blade clad in black. Only Ryo Misaki could become the archetype as he dragged along the karma from his lost memories.

Ovan had wanted to resurrect his daughter as a new AI in *The World* using the eight dimensions from the Morganna Factors.

"If Aina was just like Harald Hoerwick's Aura," Ryo said, "none of the players will be able to see Aina since she's a higher-dimensional being. We'll only catch glimpses of her footprints or fragments of the fragments of her shadow. Humans can't even properly perceive the third dimension even though we live in it.

"Did The Rebirth truly activate? Only Aina could prove that. It would be difficult for anyone to perceive if she was even around."

"We've made it this far, so I'm sure it did," Reiko replied and placed her hand on Ryo's shoulder.

Ovan had given them a farewell present. He had said that the only thing that could bury the emptiness in Ryo's heart did not lay in the truths that existed outside his soul. Only the power of his will could bury that emptiness. The Heavenly Path resided within himself.

"I ... I'm proud of the path I've chosen," Ryo stated. The emptiness in his starving heart could not be buried by others calling

him a god or a hero.

"I see. That's the type of story this was," Reiko replied. That was how she drew an end to her story as Pi.

"Are you going to stick with CC Corp?" Ryo asked, changing the subject to the future.

"There's a mountain-load of cleanup work to do. Upper management has it in their sights to reopen *The World*, but I'm not sure if I'll stick around or not. I'll worry about that later," Reiko said with a laugh.

A bright voice exclaimed as a man opened the hospital room's door, "Oh, really? You're from Yamaguchi? I'm from Kanazawa." Tomonari Kasumi had entered into the room while chatting with a nurse.

Tomonari tossed Ryo a sports drink and handed Reiko the bottled mineral water she had requested.

"What about Mr. Kasumi?" Ryo asked, directing the question to Reiko.

"He's back to being a part-timer."

"It's horrible! Just listen to what happened, Ryo!" Tomonari began his rant about a poor young man who moved to Tokyo only to lose his job.

"This isn't the sort of thing you tell a high schooler who still has a bright future ahead of him!" Reiko snapped before changing the subject. "How would everyone like to go on a trip together?"

"A trip...?"

"Once everything's calmed down, of course. We could do it during fall break. We'll rent a minivan and I'll drive."

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"Awesome! It reminds me of my college days," Tomonari exclaimed. He jumped right into picking out places they might want to visit.

"We'll go to Wakayama," Reiko answered.

"Why there?"

"Because Iori Nakanishi lives there."

"You mean Bo?" Ryo asked, looking at Reiko.

"We'll invite Ms. Kusaka and everyone. I'm not sure if Kaoru will come or not. He lives in Kanagawa, so we could pick him up on the way."

"It'll be a sight to see when that recluse leaves his room!" Tomonari laughed.

"I'm sure he would if Misaki asked him to."

"Why do you keep pairing us up?!"

"Ryo...."

Ryo thought he heard the sleeping Shino call his name after his little explosion over getting teased.

"Sorry, Shino. Guess I got too loud." Ryo apologized, lowering the volume of his voice.

Shino Nanao had regained conscious. She wasn't the only one, either. Takumi Hino and all of the other Lost Ones in this hospital had left the Net and returned to their bodies in the real world. Now they needed to regain their strength. They probably had rehabilitation waiting for them once they were well enough.

As Ryo looked into Shino's face, he saw that her expression was still one of great fatigue. However, there was also a color of warmth. It was a mixture of relief and kindness.

"Hmm?"

"It sounds fun," Ryo said. Shino's smile was still there. Now Ryo just needed to become strong enough to tell her the truth about Ovan.

AINA.

Ovan had pulled it off.



Books were scattered across the floor. The room was always such a mess. The room lacked a bookcase with no other furniture to be found save for a single old rocking chair.

A rustling sound filled the air as the sleeping beauty got off her rocking chair. The truth about Tri-Edge that had branded her chest was no longer there. The young Shadow Warlock opened the original copy of the "Epitaph of Twilight." It held the same type of power as the hero's bracelet and the Epitaph Users' Avatars.

The girl checked to make sure there were still blank pages at the end of the book before looking up at the endless sky. The way that her mind's eye dramatically grew larger was like a star exploding. The world was in a constant state of flux.

"The Terror of Death—the self-*vijnana*—lost his path. His wings fought to fly toward the heavens as he returned to his friends who had been waiting for him at the cathedral. As for my father, the *Alaya-vijnana*...."

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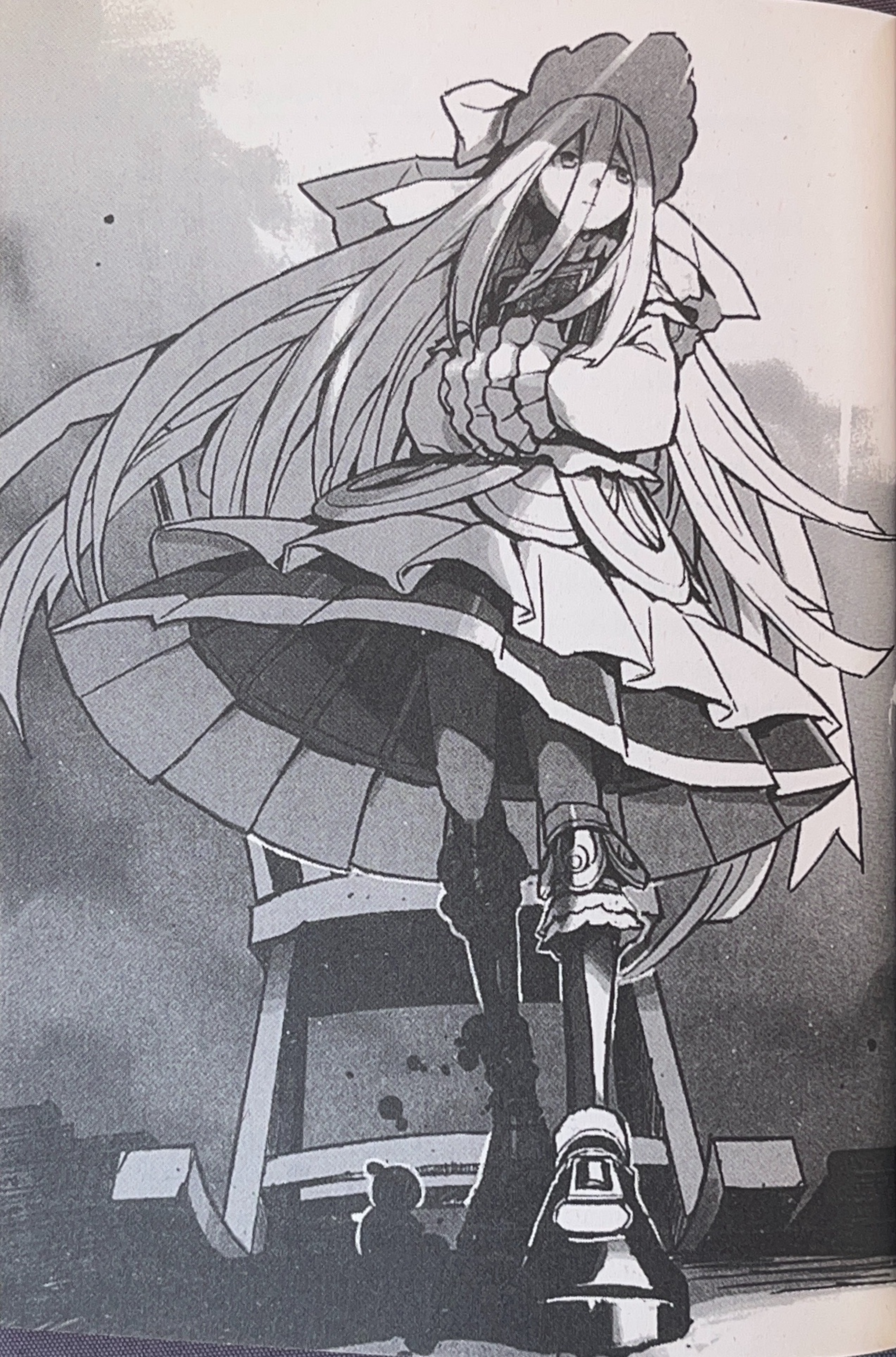
The Shadow Warlock suddenly placed the book down by her side as she picked something up off the ground. Now that she existed on a higher plane of existence, could she even grab onto those tinted glasses? Or were they not truly there to begin with? The young Shadow Warlock had lost her father, who had taken on a truly noble form. At the same time, she honestly and truly had him all to herself.

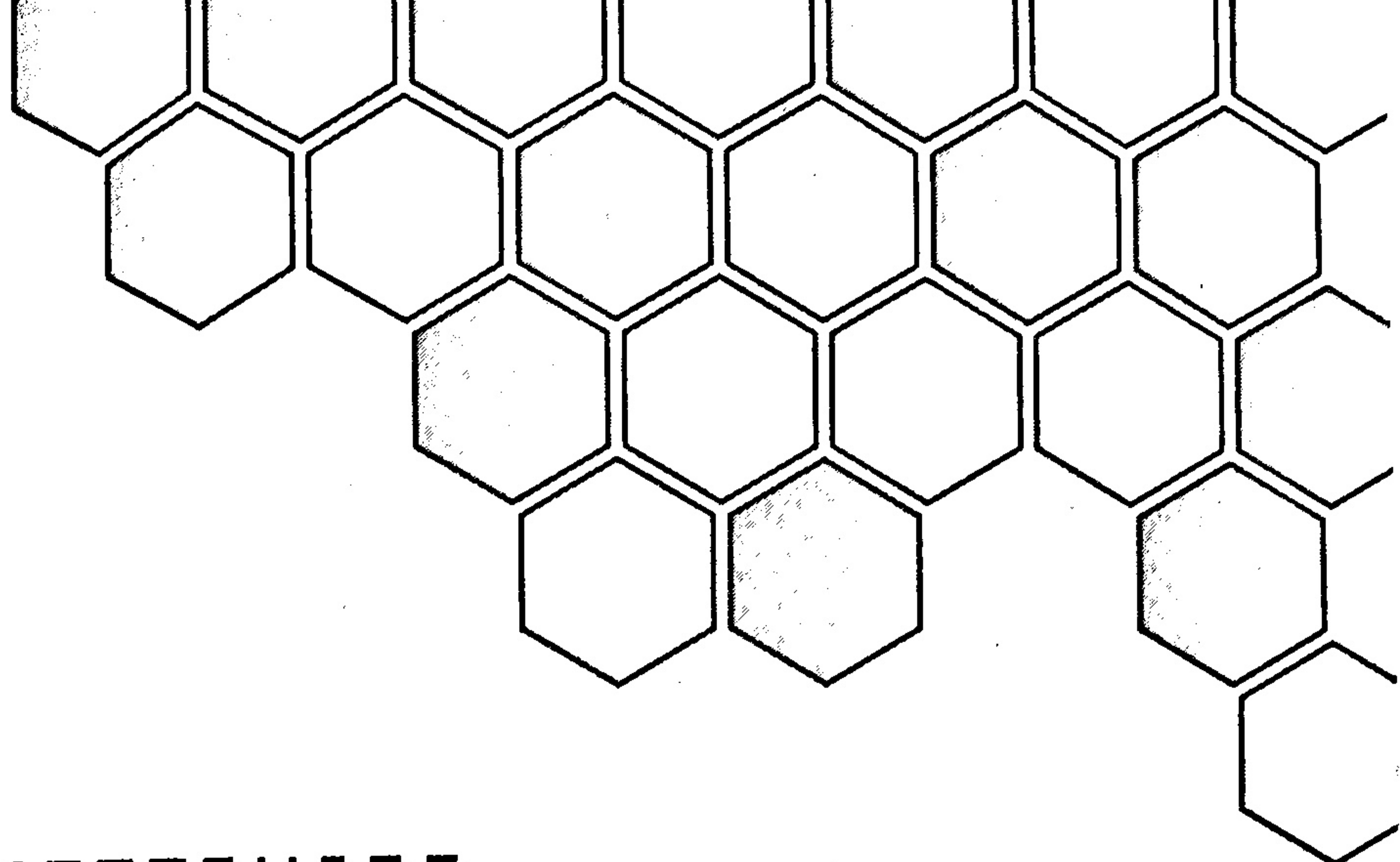
Aina began walking forward. Her thick-soled shoes left behind oozing footprints that resembled back bubbles.

The Rebirth had been activated.

The Artificially Intelligent Ninth Anima (AINA) had heard the alarm clock go off.

That would be her name when the ninth spirit that resides within words made her appearance.





AFTERWORD

The .hack//G.U. novel series is hereby over.

When I first got to read CyberConnect2's ideas for the G.U. games, I was probably as shocked as the gamers by *The World R:2's* plot, what happened to Mia, and the loss of Aura. Those were the facts and premises for the game.

In the previous series we rejoiced over Aura's birth. Now in this series we've lost her. If that's the case, then her "death" should be respected and investigated into further. At least, that's what I thought for this book.

I managed to pick out all of the side stories that should be collected into this book. But I imagine I didn't cover absolutely everything everyone wanted to know. As the writer, I was only entrusted with the part of the story encompassing the eight Epitaph Users. Although you might want to learn about how the previous

story's hero, Kite, is getting along, I'm afraid I don't know myself. As such, I cannot write about it.

Everyone who has helped with this book, thank you. I would like to particularly thank my illustrator, Yuzuka Morita, for sticking through with this until the end.

Thank you for your support for these seven years, since I began working on the first series.

Tatsuya Hamazaki

March 2008